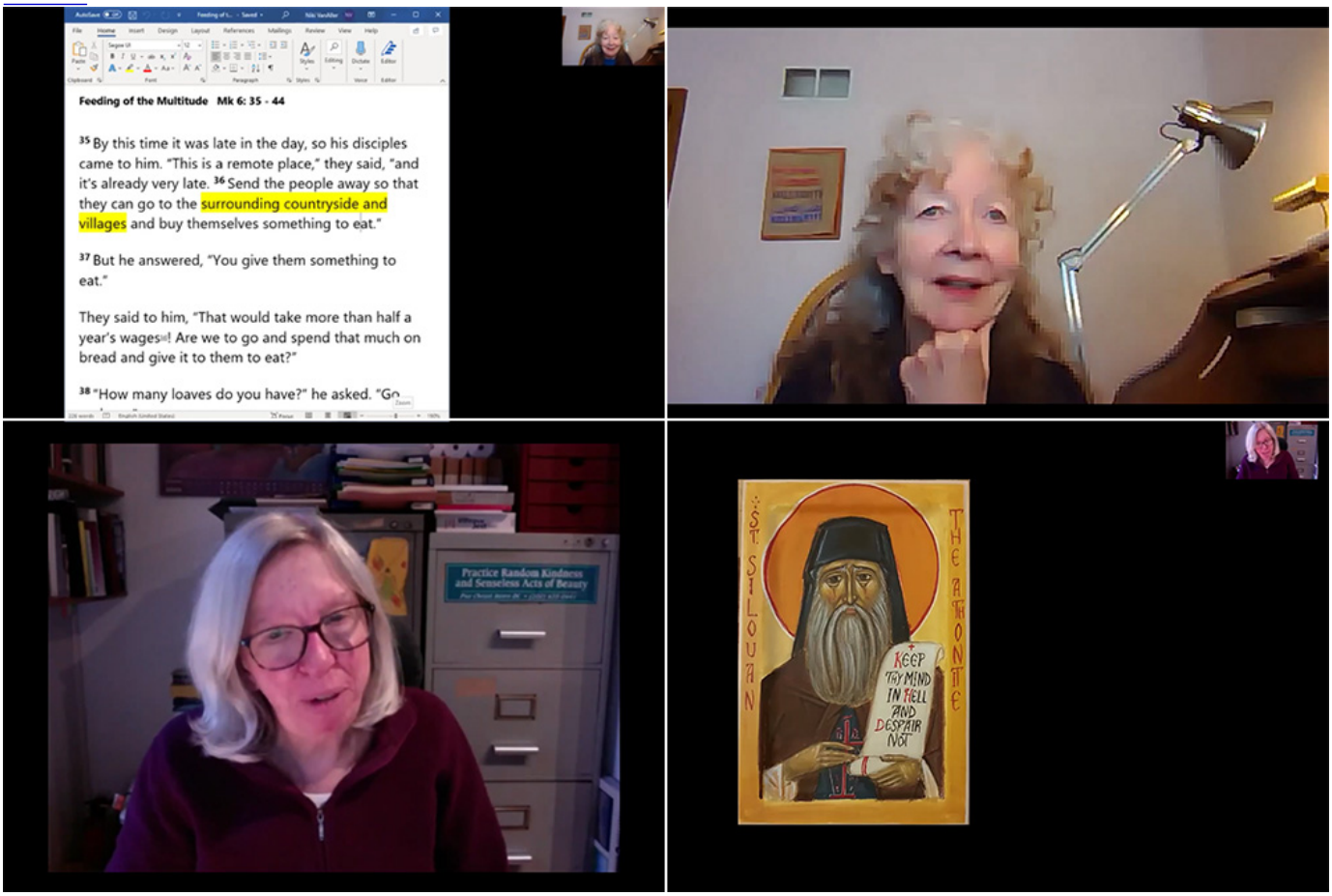
News



Speakers for the 2021 "Sacred Heart Gathering for Peace and Justice," held on Zoom Feb. 20, included author Kathy Kelly (top row), and Nancy Forest-Flier (bottom row), who read the speech her husband, Jim Forest, had prepared. (NCR screenshots/YouTube/Coalition for Peace Action)

by Madeleine Davison

View Author Profile
mdavison@ncronline.org

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Amid a global pandemic, ongoing wars and environmental disaster, peace activists urged attendees at an annual gathering on Feb. 20 to hold onto hope and persevere in the face of despair.

During the annual "Sacred Heart Gathering for Peace and Justice," held on Zoom this year, translator and peace activist Nancy Forest-Flier read the speech her husband, Jim Forest, had prepared on the "duty of hope," and peace activist and author Kathy Kelly spoke about the biblical mandate to cooperate against injustice. Forest was hospitalized for an illness prior to the gathering, and was unable to attend.

The annual gathering, sponsored by the Coalition for Peace Action and the Sacred Heart Peace Community in Camden, New Jersey, had more than 350 attendees, according to the sponsors.

In his speech, Forest, a former Catholic Worker who organized against nuclear weapons and the war in Vietnam as co-founder of the Catholic Peace Fellowship, wrote about his darkest moments as a peace activist. In his speech, he urged attendees to work for justice without worrying about whether they would see results in their lifetimes.

"Keep your mind in hell and despair not," he wrote, quoting a phrase God is supposed to have told the Eastern Orthodox St. Silouan when he was struggling with demons.

During the Vietnam War, he and other Catholic Peace Fellowship members distributed literature promoting faith-based conscientious objection to the draft. Forest, along with 13 other activists including clergy (collectively known as the Milwaukee 14), was arrested and incarcerated after protesting the draft by stealing and burning thousands of draft cards in 1968.

But despite his and other activists' efforts, the intensity of the war continued to increase, Forest wrote. He recalled his anguish at watching the carnage and destruction in Vietnam. He felt caught in a "hurricane of depression."

"In a sense, like all peace groups, we were a huge failure," he said.

> 'Hope may be a duty, but the duty of hope stands on a foundation of prayer, love and gratitude.'
>
> —Jim Forest
>
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During this time, Forest's friend, the Trappist Fr. Thomas Merton, wrote him a letter encouraging him to focus less on ideals and outcomes, and more on the people he was reaching and the value of the work itself.

"You are probably striving to build yourself and identity in your work out of your work and your witness. You are using it, so to speak, to protect yourself against nothingness, annihilation," Merton told Forest in the letter. "That is not the right use of your work. All the good that you will do will come not from you, but from the fact that you have allowed yourself, in the obedience of faith, to be used by God's love."

Forest said he also took courage from the example of his friend Dorothy Day, the legendary social activist and co-founder of the Catholic Worker newspaper. Day, he said, had a disciplined prayer life, which helped her maintain a hope that went beyond optimism or a fleeting state of mind.

"Hope may be a duty, but the duty of hope stands on a foundation of prayer, love and gratitude," he said.

In the speech, Forest noted that Merton, who died in December 1968, did not live to see the end of the war in Vietnam, which did not come until 1975. Forest wrote that those advocating for social justice should have a "cathedral builder's mentality" — working without expecting to see results in their lifetimes.

"Even if I knew the world was going to end tomorrow, I would plant an apple tree today," he said, quoting a saying he said Day often used.

For her part, Kelly — along with her friend Sarah Ball, a psychiatric nurse and peace activist — explored Scripture, art and music to contemplate the importance of acting out of love and cooperation to end war, environmental degradation and poverty.

Kelly reflected on the Jan. 6 Capitol riot by Donald Trump supporters, recalling the refrain uttered by Joe Biden and countless others in its wake — "This is not who we

are."

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The U.S. has ransacked and pillaged other countries, and supported dictatorships and military coups around the world, Kelly said. Americans have more in common with the insurrectionists than they may like to think, she said.

"This may not be who we are, but this is what we do," she said.

Kelly drew on the two accounts of Jesus feeding multitudes in the Gospel of Mark, noting that in the feeding of the 5,000, there were a total of 12 loaves and fishes — a number that in Jewish tradition signified completeness and that also corresponded with the number of tribes of Israel — indicating that there was enough for all the Israelites to partake without squabbling over resources.

The feeding of the 4,000 — who had come a long way to be with Jesus, possibly from beyond Israel — demonstrates Jesus' love for Gentiles and people beyond his own community, Kelly said.

"Jesus is saying to his disciples in American communities, 'We've got to open this up. We've got to find a way to embrace the enemy, to love our enemy,' " Kelly said.

She said intense poverty and other human needs worldwide should call Christians to look at who they consider their enemies and try to love them as Jesus commanded.

Part of this love would mean dismantling the military industrial complex and ending war, she said. Love would also mean confronting environmental destruction and climate change, she said, in response to an audience question. Ironically, many Trump supporters will be hit hard by the consequences of environmental degradation hastened and abetted by the former president, she argued.

"We've got to start dealing with the greatest terror we face, and that's the terror of what we're doing to Mother Earth, the terror of what we're doing to our own environment," she said.

This work is not easy, she said, but it is vital to building a future for the next generations.

"It's very normal, I think, to feel fear — and even terror — when we try to embark in that kind of love," Kelly said. "And it seems to me that courage is the ability ... to control our fears so that we can act in accord with our deepest beliefs."