

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

June 19, 2007 at 10:29am

The politics of the Sacred Heart

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Last Friday marked one of my favorite days in the liturgical year, the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. For 47, I guess I'm old fashioned, but I love everything about that image. In recent years, however, I've begun to wonder: What are the social, economic and political implications of the Sacred Heart of Jesus? That question, I believe, can lead us to a whole new world of love, compassion, forgiveness, nonviolence and justice, to our own disarmed, sacred hearts.

I know that some people like the image of the Sacred Heart because it projects a safe, non-threatening God. It demonstrates the enormity of God's love for humanity, and calls us to disarm our own hearts that we too might be gentle, nonviolent, compassionate and perpetually loving. I figure most people tend to forget that this gentle Jesus also denounced injustice, turned over the tables in the Temple, and was arrested, jailed, tortured and executed.

But there's even more to the story. On Dec. 29, 1673, when Jesus appeared to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque in Paray-le-Monial, France, he said: "My divine heart is so impassioned with love for humanity, it cannot contain the flames of its burning charity inside. It must spread them through you and show itself to humanity so that they may be enriched by the previous treasures that I share with you, treasures which have all the sanctifying and saving graces needed to draw them back from the abyss of destruction."

The abyss of destruction? Poor Margaret Mary probably didn't have a clue about what Jesus was talking

about, but we sure do. Today we stand at the brink of unprecedented global destruction, global warming and global violence. This violence pushes us personally and internationally ever closer to the abyss of destruction, but the grace of the Sacred Heart -- with all its burning social, economic and political implications -- has the power to convert us into people of Gospel nonviolence, pull us back from the brink, and create a new world of peace with justice.

Editor's Note: In answer to reader inquiries: The trial of Fr. John Dear and other members of the Santa Fe Nine for trespassing at a federal building in Santa Fe, N.M., as part of a national action to end the war in Iraq last September, has been postponed again until Sept. 6.

The Sacred Heart of Jesus is our way out of the madness of war, violence and injustice. But who thinks of the "abyss of destruction" in light of the Sacred Heart of Jesus? If we were to adopt the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus as our image of a nonviolent, peacemaking God, and live not just individually but communally, nationally and globally according to that nonviolent, radiant love, the world would be disarmed.

The image of the Sacred Heart invites us to practice universal love, eternal forgiveness, infinite compassion, active nonviolence and perfect peace. That means, among other things, we can no longer support killing, injustice, war, or any kind of violence. It means further that we must live out a new ethic and create new nonviolent structures that institutionalize nonviolent love, dignity and peace for every human being on the planet.

Alas, for centuries, the Sacred Heart of Jesus has been coopted into a private piety disconnected from the world, politics, and war -- from the abyss of destruction. I have the impression that some uphold the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus on the one hand, and the flag on the other, as if Jesus' personal salvation for us individually has nothing to do with what our country does, or how the poor suffer and die; as if we can worship the Sacred Heart, yet remain racist, sexist, greedy, selfish, violent, and warlike, personally and as a church and a nation.

I don't think we can truly honor the Sacred Heart of Jesus and at the same time support the war on Iraq, or the death penalty, or global warming, or corporate greed, or U.S. imperialism, or the School of the Americas, or the occupation of Palestine, or the systematic oppression of Darfur and Haiti, or the development of nuclear weapons at Los Alamos. Or sit back in silence while these injustices rage.

Some conservative right wing Catholics like the image of the Sacred Heart and its personal implications, but fail to let its nonviolent love unfold in concrete political policies and structures. Others on the more liberal wing dismiss the image as a pious prop of the Catholic establishment, instead of a call to plumb the mystical depths of universal love.

In any case, the heart of God beats on with a disarming, global love awaiting our response, inviting us back from the abyss of destruction. The proof of our serious acceptance of this divine love will be nothing less than feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, educating all children in the methods of nonviolence, guaranteeing free healthcare to all, cleaning up the earth, ending our wars, dismantling our weapons, and sharing our resources equally.

The Sacred Heart cancels out all violence. It offers perfect nonviolence. To honor it is to worship a God of nonviolence, to welcome that disarming love and to practice that same loving, universal nonviolence. If we dare live in that nonviolent love of Jesus, and unpack its social, economic and political implications for ourselves and the world, we will become instruments that help lead humanity back from the abyss of destruction. Nothing is more important.

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John Dear's new book, *Transfiguration*" (Doubleday) is available from www.amazon.com. Next week, he will be teaching at Loyola in Chicago, and next month, he will be on a speaking tour of England and Scotland. For information, see: www.johndear.org

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