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My day in court

John Dear | Jan. 29, 2008 On the Road to Peace

*"**Y**ou are a renegade priest and a renegade citizen. Many people think you're a hero of nonviolence, but you're a phony. You're a fraud. You are a person of violence because you used a hammer on one of our nuclear weapons! You're a coward. You're afraid. You are no Gandhi. I will not join your cause, but I will not make a martyr out of you so that the world thinks you are the heir of Gandhi."*

These were the words of the federal judge last week as he sentenced me for an antiwar protest. (For background see: ncrcafe.org/node/1565 [1].)

In my speech, I quoted Gandhi and suggested that the judge either renounce his verdict and join our campaign to end the ongoing evil U.S. war on Iraq, or if he really believed in the system that is killing Iraqi children and maintaining weapons of mass destruction, give me the maximum sentence.

He sentenced me to six months of supervised probation, 40 hours of community service and a $510 fine. Months earlier, my co-defendants were also chastised, but none received this sentence. (One was fined $35; others had their six hours of community service suspended.) I said I would not pay anything, not do community service and not cooperate with the system. I was ordered to report immediately to the U.S. Probation Office, where I was told that I was not allowed to leave New Mexico for the next six months without permission, that I would have weekly visits with a probation officer, that they would make surprise visits to the place where I live perhaps weekly, and that they might require weekly drug testing. I told him I would not cooperate. Later, another probation officer said to me, "You will lose, Fr. John, if you buck the system."

So I expect they will issue a warrant for my arrest, haul me back before the judge, and put in me in jail for a certain time. The saga continues.

I'm grateful for the prayers, blessings and support of friends near and far. One said to me in the courtroom afterwards, "You should just do the sentence and move on. It's been a year and a half since you were arrested in the elevator. It isn't worth all this trouble." In many ways I agree. The government should never have arrested us, prosecuted us, tried us and sentenced us. But now, why not get it over with?

One big reason is that the war goes on, even though it doesn't get much media coverage. In the political campaigns and primaries, the war is barely mentioned (neither is the environmental crisis, global poverty, nuclear weapons, the death penalty, or other urgent crises).

Few politicians, pundits or priests speak about the war. Dennis Kucinich talked about this glaring cover up as he bowed out of the race last Friday. "We asked for jobs," he said, "we get war. We asked for healthcare, we get war. We asked for funds for education, we get war. We ask for a clean environment, we get war. It is time to end this war. It is time to end war as policy and have the government start taking care of things here at home."

A Pax Christi friend who attended the sentencing told me of the death in Iraq last week of a 21-year-old New Mexican. The entire town turned out for his funeral. The flags went up, the church was packed, and the priest spoke at length about the just war theory. He said this was a just war, that the young man died for a just cause. Everyone in town, except my friend, was relieved. Her sad story confirmed my determination to resist this ongoing unjust war, and to do so as a priest.

As a Christian and Jesuit, I feel I must say no to the war, in this case by resisting the system. During those moments when my life feels disrupted, I recall the millions of Iraqis and Afghanis who have had their lives disrupted and destroyed because of our war, and I realize it's a small price.

The pursuit of peace, I believe, doesn't necessarily make us feel better and bring us consolation. It often leads to misunderstandings, attacks, hate mail, insults, and legal jeopardy -- to the cross. But this seems to be the way the struggle has always gone -- from Jesus and the early Christians to Mahatma Gandhi and Dorothy Day.

In a culture of war, if you speak for peace, your life will be disrupted. In a world of poverty, hunger, racism, nuclear weapons, global warming, if you take a public stand for justice and social change, your life will be disrupted. In a time of empire, if you resist the imperial authorities, your life will be disrupted. It's much easier to sit back, not get involved, not challenge the system, and delude ourselves into thinking we are making peace because we are so peaceful. I think we have to challenge the system, if we can.

The Gospel story remains the primary motivation for my resistance. I'm always amazed that Jesus did not spend his life sitting under a tree, dispensing his wisdom. He stood up, spoke out, and marched to Jerusalem, where he confronted the culture of injustice, the empire and its religious backers, and suffered the consequences of his civilly disobedient, nonviolent action. His life was disrupted, wrecked, shattered.

On the morning of my sentencing, I reread the Gospel accounts of his trials, how he was hauled before the Sanhedrin, Annas and Caiaphas, Pilate and Herod and back to Pilate, before he was finally condemned to death. Jesus was called every name in the book. At one point, he was struck in the face by a soldier. By and large, he kept silent, and emerged as the true judge over the courts and the empire and through his nonviolent suffering love, all humanity.

If I want to enter his story, share his life, and follow his lead, I have to enter the fray and resist the empire, too, and that's a messy and complicated business. Still, it's a blessing to be misunderstood, insulted and in legal jeopardy for one's pursuit of God's reign of peace. As I left the courthouse, I remembered the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are you when they insult you?Rejoice and be glad!"

This week marks the 60th anniversary of Gandhi's assassination. Gandhi maintained that the pursuit of truth and the practice of active nonviolence require public confrontation with the system of injustice, trusting that the

acceptance of suffering in love and truth will win out in the long run.

"Nonviolence in its dynamic condition means conscious suffering," Gandhi wrote. "It does not mean meek submission to the will of the evildoer, but it means the pitting of one's whole soul against the will of the tyrant. Working under this law of our being, it is possible for a single individual to defy the whole might of an unjust empire to save his honor, his religion, his soul and lay the foundation for that empire's fall."

"Nonviolence means courage of the highest order and therefore readiness to suffer," Gandhi wrote. "Let those who believe in nonviolence as the only method of achieving real freedom, keep the lamp of nonviolence burning bright in the midst of the present impenetrable gloom. The truth of a few will count, the untruth of millions will vanish even like chaff before a whiff of wind."

With such words, such examples, I take heart, count my blessings, and keep on saying no to war, hoping with friends that someday, we will be able finally to say yes to a new era of peace and nonviolence.

Fr. Dear is scheduled to lead a Lenten retreat Feb. 22-24, "The Passion, Death and Resurrection of the Nonviolent Jesus," at the Kirkridge Center in Bangor, Pa. (**www.kirkridge.org** **[2]**). The DVD, "The Narrow Path," featuring his teachings on Gospel nonviolence, is available from **www.sandamianofoundation.org** **[3]**. To attend one of his speaking events, or to host him later this fall for a reading from his forthcoming autobiography, see: **www.johndear.org** **[4]**.

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