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Pax Christi

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

The gathering in Santa Fe drew people from around the state. We attended such workshops as “Catholic Social Teaching and Nuclear Weapons,” “Spirituality and the Practice of the Nonviolent Life,” “Women’s Spirituality of Peace,” “Peacework: Henri Nouwen’s Spirituality of Peace,” “Working to End the War in Iraq,” and “Abolishing the Death Penalty.”

At the gathering in Albuquerque we prayed and shared with one another. We talked about the themes of resurrection and Pentecost. We compared Luke 24, the road to Emmaus story, and Acts 2, the emboldening of the disciples to proclaim God’s reign of justice and peace, and how we too are invited to enter that journey.

Pax Christi goes back over sixty years now. It began in 1945 in a prison in southern France. The prison brimmed with resisters who had abetted fleeing Jews and who were now awaiting the one-way trip to Buchenwald, where they would surely face execution.

One of the prisoners was Bishop Theas, an outspoken critic of the destruction of villages and the persecution of Jews. He negotiated with his Nazi wardens for the right to conduct a special Mass.

A few weeks earlier, Nazis had committed atrocities nearby, having rounded up local villagers and locked them in their church and, in massive retaliation for the murder of several Nazi soldiers, set the church aflame. The prisoners got wind of the news and burned with desire for vengeance. At the Mass, Bishop Theas preached “love your enemies, do good to those that hate you, pray for those who persecute.”

His homily did not go uninterrupted; several of the men contradicted him. The bishop replied, “I cannot preach anything to you but what Jesus said: ‘Love your enemies’ I can preach no more, no less.” At the Lord’s prayer, the bishop added “Germany” after the line, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” His fellow prisoners could scarcely bear it.

That Mass changed his life. At the war’s end, after his release, Bishop Theas dedicated his life to reconciling French and German Catholics. Shortly afterward, a French lay woman, Madame Dortel-Claudot, was getting a “prayer crusade” underway. She wanted to organize a peaceful procession of reconciliation between French and German villages on the border. Would Bishop Theas help? she asked. He agreed. He lent his support and within months, such processions between old enemies occurred regularly.

The bishop named the movement, “Pax Christi” -- the peace of Christ. Word of it spread, and within a year, the Vatican blessed it, and not long after, institutionalized it as the Catholic Church’s official body to promote peace, disarmament and reconciliation. Bishop Theas and Madame Dortel-Claudot are our founders.

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Pax Christi blossomed in Europe fast. Today one finds branches in more than 30 nations, including in Latin America and Africa. Pax Christi also has consultative status as a non-governmental organization at the United Nations.

Pax Christi USA was formed in 1972 by Gordon Zahn and Eileen Egan, along with supporters such as Dorothy Day and Thomas Gumbleton. In 1985, the great Benedictine Sisters of Erie gave it a huge boost by setting up the national office in Erie, PA, where it remains. Today, Pax Christi USA has some 350 local groups and tens of thousands of members.

Its mission statement: “to create a world that reflects the peace of Christ by exploring, articulating and witnessing to the call of Christian nonviolence. It commits itself to peace education and with the help of its bishop members, promotes the Gospel imperative of peacemaking as a priority in the Catholic Church in the United States.”

The U.S. branch espouses four priorities: spirituality of nonviolence and peacemaking; disarmament,

demilitarization and reconciliation with justice; economic and interracial justice in the USA; and human rights and global restoration.

In 1995, at Pax Christi's 50th anniversary, some two hundred of us met with Pope John Paul II in the Vatican. He took extra time to meet each one of us, and in his speech said, "Movements like Pax Christi are precious. They help draw people's attention to the violence which shatters the harmony between human beings which is at the heart of creation. They help to develop conscience, so that justice and the search for the common good can prevail in the relations between individuals and peoples. These are the foundations for lasting peace."

Marcus Page and I founded Pax Christi in our corner of the world in January 2003 -- Pax Christi New Mexico. A handful of local groups have sprung up and together organize the annual Pax Christi Peace Vigil on Hiroshima Day in Los Alamos. On the 60th anniversary of the bombing, 325 of us prayed in sackcloth and ashes in repentance and grief. Over the past five years, a series of inspiring speakers have visited us-- Bishop Gumbleton, Daniel Berrigan, Kathy Kelly, Roy Bourgeois, Mairead Corrigan Maguire, Jim Douglass and Megan McKenna.

I believe that Pax Christi is crucial to the church's future. My hope is that every Catholic in the United States will become a member, that every parish will form a local group, that Pax Christi will nurture the Catholic community into becoming a community of nonviolence, and that it will help the church reject the just war theory and return to the Sermon on the Mount as our catechism and basis for operating.

Pax Christi, like the peace movement in general, is just beginning. We have only just started to imagine and work for a world without war, poverty, nuclear weapons and global warming. We have just begun to reclaim the nonviolence of Jesus for our church. We've just begun to grasp the implications for our parishes and presence in the world. We've just begun to make our peaceable presence felt, to be a leaven within the church.

So Pax Christi needs to grow; its national office, I suggest, should set up shop in Washington, D.C., where it might better influence the U.S. Catholic Bishops' conference, the national media and the government. I hope over the next decade its membership will jump from 25,000 to 100,000, and the number of regions, like Pax Christi New Mexico, will jump from 20 to 50. (To organize this of course will require many more donors and contributions to Pax Christi!)

Here in New Mexico we are doing our part to form a peacemaking church. We feel energized by our grassroots gatherings, and empowered to be part of a global church movement for peace and justice.

We're now gearing up for our annual Hiroshima commemoration. This year it is centered on "An Evening with Sister Helen Prejean," on August 1st in Santa Fe. The next day, we'll go to Los Alamos for our

annual prayer vigil. Sr. Helen will join us in putting on sackcloth and ashes and, like the people of Nineveh, expressing our repentance -- in our case for the mortal sins of war and executions and nuclear weapons -- and join with us in turning toward nuclear abolition, reconciliation, and justice.

Likely, our gesture will draw no news cameras and make no headlines. But the gesture attests that the Catholic peace movement, in a mustard-seed way, is growing. In other words, in a hard time, it keeps hope alive.

For information on Pax Christi, see www.paxchristi.net. John's forthcoming autobiography, "A Persistent Peace," with a foreword by Martin Sheen, can be ordered now at www.amazon.com, and read about at www.persistentpeace.com. His 1992 book, "Seeds of Nonviolence" has just been republished by www.wipfandstock.com. John will be teaching a weeklong class on "Gandhi, King, Merton and Dorothy Day," at Loyola University in Chicago, from July 7-11. See www.retreatsintl.org

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