

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

July 1, 2008 at 8:25am

Viva Oaxaca!

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

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A few weeks ago, I was in Oaxaca, Mexico, on retreat with Maryknoll Lay Missioners who serve and accompany the poor. One of the most beautiful places in Mexico, Oaxaca has a gorgeous main plaza and never-ending market, but 75 percent of its people, most of them indigenous, suffer grinding poverty, thanks to NAFTA and multi-national corporations.

Two years ago, 70,000 pre-school, primary and secondary school teachers staged a sit in protest for higher wages in the downtown area (about 50 city blocks surrounding the main plaza). Before long, traffic came to a standstill. Banks, highways and government offices were blocked. And the city shut down.

In response, the government cracked down, and the movement grew. Soon there were 100,000 people in the barricaded streets. So the government through the police created death squads who randomly assassinated 25 people, including a young New Yorker, Bradley Will, who had journeyed there to document the unfolding events.

My hosts Kathy and Phil Dahl-Bredine walked me through the now quiet plaza, and pointed out where the stunning protests and horrific government repression took place. While the people exercised their power, the violent repression shocked the world. Today, government corruption, multi-national corporate oppression and widespread poverty grind on.

But Kathy and Phil testify to the amazing strength of the struggling people. They too are amazing. In the

1960s, they raised their seven children in Chicago, while serving the inner-city and marching for justice and peace. Friends of Dorothy Day, they moved to New Mexico in 1979 to live off the land. Eight years ago, as Maryknoll lay missionaries, they moved to San Isidro, Tilantongo, a tiny village in the Mixteca Alta of Oaxaca. There, they went deeper into voluntary poverty and began living in solidarity with their campesino neighbors. They've learned first hand how U.S. corporate greed strangles the world's poor, beginning with our neighbors to the south, and how the struggling poor continue to point a way out of global injustice.

They started talking about the global economic collapse the minute I arrived, telling me about its local impact, most dramatically in the astronomical rise in price for a bag of fertilizer, from \$25 a year ago to \$80 today. Indigenous farmers can't afford that, so their livelihood and culture, based on traditional corn-growing and selling that dates back thousands of years, now faces extinction. So do they.

As a result of free trade policies and market liberalization doctrines, agricultural and food prices worldwide are now at the mercy of a few mammoth agro-business and agro-export corporations and speculative investors, Phil wrote in a recent e-mail, summing up the grim situation. Conventional farming has been made economically unfeasible here by the international oligopolies that manipulate markets, and this will surely translate into a new wave of migration of small farmers to Mexican cities and to the U.S.

The plight of Oaxaca, of course, symbolizes the world. While the average yearly income of U.S. households is \$60,528.00, nearly half of the world's six billion people live on less than \$2 a day. The U.N. estimates that some 900 million people are currently starving. Perhaps 100 million people have joined the ranks of the starving this year alone, the U.N. says. That number will continue to climb as long as U.S. policies support the greedy multi-nationals, and their total disregard of the world's poor and the environment.

Small farming communities are folding everywhere. Global food prices are skyrocketing, in part too because of increasingly chaotic weather and the shift from growing grain for fuel. Rice used to be \$300 a metric ton, but now it's well over \$1,000. Meanwhile, profits for agro-businesses and exporters (such as Cargill and Archer Daniels Midland) have soared.

Fortunately, Phil writes, there are strong movements among small farmers here toward an agro-ecological production based on local resources and organic fertilizers that are creating independence from international market forces and creating a sustainable village agriculture.

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That sentence holds the key for the world's poor, and ourselves as well. Our hope, I learned anew in Oaxaca, lies in the organized, grass-roots movements of the world's disenfranchised peoples, especially the indigenous. They're the ones who actually know how to live off the land, how to share what they've got, how to protect the earth itself. They know how to create fair, just, nonviolent cultures -- not us.

The good news, Phil says, lies in the energetic groups from the Global South who, with great conviction and creativity, are promoting an alternative future for our planet. And it may be this great energy from the South that will tip the scales in favor of a rational future in the coming decades. It is an energy we don't often hear about in our U.S. media, but it is one that should give us hope.

Phil tells the story of Oaxaca's indigenous farmers and the hope they offer in his impressive new book, *The Other Game: Lessons from how Life Is Played in Mexican Villages*

, (co-authored by Stephen Hicken, Orbis, 2008), which I highly recommend to all those who care about the world? poor and hungry.

The Other Game tells about life in Kathy and Phil's community, the Mixteca Alta, near the 11th century capitol city of Santiago Tilantongo where locals have planted hundreds of varieties of multi-colored native corns for more than 5,000 years. Though NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement) and the multi-nationals threaten their culture and communities, the indigenous people have begun a small but aggressive campaign to take responsibility for their land and communities, and in the process, are showing us a way forward.

In the last decade in Mixteca Alta, for example, these nonviolent, indigenous communities planted more than three million native trees. They're reclaiming their traditional corn-growing methods to create a more viable local agriculture system, and institutionalizing community-sharing so that everyone can live healthy, dignified lives.

Using the rich heritage of native seeds and indigenous farming knowledge, fertilizing and rebuilding soils with green manure crops, worm casting, and locally made ecological fertilizers made with locally available resources, Phil writes, they are breaking the restrictions of dependence on outsiders and re-creating the ancient system of biodiversity that made indigenous agriculture productive and sustainable for thousands of years. By defending their native seeds and plants from contamination with genetically modified seeds, they are preserving a heritage for humanity.

We are not campesinos because we are too ignorant to do anything else, one local indigenous leader, Jesus Leon, told Phil. We are campesinos because it is our vocation, an important vocation, one of the most important in the world since we all depend on food. And we have thousands of years of knowledge about the land that has been passed on to us as our heritage by our ancestors.

We must find ways to break the stranglehold that these immensely powerful corporations wield over our common life, Phil argues. We must learn economic habits that are socially and environmentally sustainable. That responsibility rests primarily with the North American and Western European people who are practicing and promoting a way of life that undermines the life-giving potential of the planet. We are the unsustainable element of the human family and not the example to follow.

Jesus Leon and his co-workers are reclaiming the land, developing their own local agriculture system, and ensuring that everyone has enough to eat. They model how the rest of the world should operate -- through equal redistribution of food and natural resources, pursuit of natural, organic resources, and the steadfast elimination of extreme poverty. In the process, they sustain their environment, protect their communities from the roots of war and provide lasting security.

The Third World offers to humanity an alternative vision and a plan to humanize the world economy and international relations, says Bishop Emeritus Samuel Ruiz of Chiapas. These alternatives are of incalculable value to society of the wealthy nations.

Throughout Latin America new groups are forming around a fresh vision of an inclusive democracy, more egalitarian economies, and a new respect for the indigenous environmental worldview, Phil writes in *The Other Game*.

The Global South is where the greatest excesses of the current economic and social models are felt and where, as a result, new creative energy is being stimulated. The people of the South are also free of the assumptions we have in the North about the inevitability of the world as it is presently arranged -- assumptions that cripple not only our hope but our imagination and our vital energy.

Just before I arrived in Oaxaca, the 2008 Goldman Environmental Prize, the world's largest prize honoring grass-roots environmentalists, was awarded to Jesus Leon on behalf of his work with the Mixteca Alta. Awarding an international environmental prize to an indigenous campesino sends a clear message: he and his co-workers point to the solution of the global hunger crisis, not U.S. corporations, lobbyists, CEOs, politicians, or media pundits.

I left Oaxaca moved by the suffering people, and inspired by their nonviolent action, grass-roots organizing, and positive steps for a new global economy. People like Jesus Leon invite us to learn a new way of life from the world's indigenous. Like that other Jesus, they call us to let go of our possessions, simplify our lives, tithe our income to groups like Oxfam and Catholic Relief Services, walk with the world's poor, resist corporate greed and U.S. militarism, and advocate a vision for a new nonviolent global economics.

As we learn more and more from our sisters and brothers in the Global South, I believe we'll not only help them claim the necessities of life, we'll help ourselves reclaim our lost souls and welcome God's reign at hand.

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For information on the Maryknoll Lay Mission Program in Mexico, visit: www.mesamexico.org. To learn about Jesus Leon, see: www.goldmanprize.org

John's autobiography, *A Persistent Peace*, with a foreword by Martin Sheen, is available Aug. 1. It can be ordered now at www.amazon.com. See also: www.persistentpeace.com. From July 7-11, John will be teaching a weeklong class on "Gandhi, King, Merton and Dorothy Day," at Loyola Univ. in Chicago. See www.retreatsintl.org and www.johndear.org for details.

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