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The audacity of peace

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

This weekend, Barack Obama just freshly elected, I joined 2,500 Catholics at the annual Call to Action conference in Milwaukee. A spirit of hope hovered in the air. And in the air, too, was a general agreement that, the election notwithstanding, our work must continue. We need to keep pushing for an end to the U.S. wars on Iraq and Afghanistan. We still need to work to eradicate poverty, hunger, disease, corporate greed and environmental destruction. We still need to work for a more just society. Shortly put, we too have to be hopemakers, and carry on the hard work of making our hope -- a world of peace -- come true.

Being hopemakers, a synonym for peacemakers -- this was the theme of my talks. It is up to us to pursue the audacity of peace, to practice the nonviolence of Jesus, and in the process, to help the church reclaim its peacemaking vocation. Need it be added, despite the election, we have our work cut out for us.

Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister, at the recent California Women's Conference, put the matter bluntly: "War is obsolete." Hers is a kind of leading-edge insight -- an insight destined to pass one day soon into conventional wisdom -- and I agree with it. The days of war are over. And we must make it known.

Just because Obama will become president, we dare not sit back. Now is the time to build and sustain a movement for the abolition of war itself. And it can begin with the immediate end of the evil U.S. war on Iraq.

And with the \$10 billion we'll save each month we can rebuild the economy, feed the starving masses, and create jobs that protect and restore creation. We can follow by dismantling our nuclear weapons and retire the star wars program and disperse the funds from these to meet human needs, beginning with those of the poor.

The election was "a terrific symbolic victory," said my friend Fr. Simon Harak, S.J., director of the Marquette Center for Peacemaking in Milwaukee. "But it means we have a lot of work to do to make that symbol into a reality for all of us. The peace movement cannot conclude our job is done. We have to work as hard as ever."

Benedictine Sr. Anne McCarthy echoed his sentiment. "The wars, the poverty, the nuclear weapons continue, and so our work must continue too. We will keep on vigiling for an end to the Iraq war and working for peace and justice."

I hope that the energy that the election unleashed among young people, and people across all walks of life, indeed people around the world, will lead everyone to work for disarmament and justice for the rest of their lives. It's vitally important that those who got involved in the campaign for political change stay involved in the lifelong struggle for global change. Therein lies our true hope.

Which is why, when asked about my hopes for President-elect Obama, I confessed that I don't place my hope in any regime or administration or government. I want us to pursue the frontiers of Gospel hope. So I place my hope in the God of peace, the nonviolent Jesus, and the Spirit of active nonviolence. It's the Holy Spirit that pushes us to side with the poor, to create social justice, disarm our weapons and protect creation. This work is the work of a lifetime, the work of God, the work of all of us, and we need the Creator, the Christ, the Spirit, to lead us in creating a new world of peace.

During the weekend, the preaching and teaching and visionary words mingled with the good feeling of the election, and there was a palpable sense of a stone wall coming down, a deep sense of possibility. For the first time in a long time, I heard people say out loud: Yes we can! Yes we can make a new world of peace. Yes we can end the wars, feed the poor, care for the earth, create a new world. Yes, each one of us can make a difference.

Many expressed the hope that the dramatic spirit unleashed over the last few days will rub off on the church, that church people across the nation will wake up and join that movement for justice and peace.

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Kathleen Kennedy Townsend shared a similar hope. But she shared disappointment as well. How many church leaders, she lamented, focused their energy and resources in recent months nudging the flock to vote according to one or two issues, to the neglect of the wide spectrum of Catholic social teaching and its implications for the common good. But church people are waking up, she said. Catholics are getting the

message; change is in the air. She noted, for example, the pope's laudatory support of President-elect Obama the day after his election.

In 1968, her father Bobby Kennedy presciently said that there would be an African American president within 40 years, she said. "I hope that in the next 40 years, we will live to see a woman pope."

The CTA conference brought together so many committed people. And I was blessed to see many dear friends. Edwina Gately, for example, spoke about the silencing of prophetic voices in the church. Dolores Huerta of the United Farmworkers called us to stand with immigrants and workers (Stop the raids! Don't build that evil wall on the Texas border! Give out temporary work permits!)

Ched Myers led scripture studies examining the biblical call to protect creation, in particular, the scriptural commandment to stop deforestation. Remi De Roo shared his experience as a bishop at Vatican II. Ken Butigan and Ken Preston led nonviolence training sessions. Jesuity Fr. Joseph Brown reflected on forgiveness and justice in African American spiritualities.

Terry Rynne taught satyagraha based on his excellent new book, *Gandhi and Jesus: The Saving Power of Nonviolence*. David Stang testified about his saintly sister Dorothy, murdered in Brazil for protecting the Amazon. He premiered a powerful new movie, "They Killed Sister Dorothy," which will be shown in January on HBO.

Throughout the conference, I pondered a phone call I got Tuesday night as I watched the election returns. It was from Carlos Santana, the legendary rock star, calling to thank me for my autobiography, *A Persistent Peace*, which he had picked up at a small bookstore in Los Angeles. He wanted to talk about the work of peace and the spiritual dimensions underneath it. A thrilling conversation with a musical hero.

"I think we have to be positive," he told me, "and help people to be positive. This is the heart of the spiritual life. We need to be filled with light, so that our light, the light of Christ, our positive energy for compassion, love and peace, will spread far and wide and touch millions of people and help change the world into a new world of peace for all."

A beautiful vision. Add to it all the voices, visions and dreams of the conference. They speak to me of the audacity of peace -- audacity implying the freedom to seize that which the powers deem off limits. Audacity liberates and inspires. It means being bold and daring. I came away from the conference inspired anew by the audacity of Jesus who goes ahead announcing God's reign of justice and peace coming in the middle of war and authoritarianism and empire. Peace is audacious. So are peacemakers.

Can we in this new moment, this new opening, work even harder for that new world without war, poverty, nuclear weapons and global warming? Can we each do our part to carry on Jesus' work of proclaiming God's reign? Can we help the church become that Gospel community of audacious peacemaking, welcoming love, boundless compassion, disarming forgiveness, and social justice? Can we give our lives for that vision, that hope, that Gospel call, and be faithful to the journey?

All weekend long, I heard it over and over: Yes we can!

Editor's Note: For NCR reporting on the Call to Action conference, see: **Catholics gather for Call To Action annual pilgrimage.**

This week, John Dear is speaking in Rochester, Binghamton, Easton, Pa. and in New York City (at Border's, Union Theological Seminary, Manhattan College and St. Francis Xavier Church) about his new autobiography, *A Persistent Peace* (Loyola Press, with a foreword by Martin Sheen). Eerdmans has just published a collection of this NCR Café essays called, *Put Down the Sword*. Both are available from www.amazon.com. For further information, see: www.persistentpeace.com and www.johndear.org.

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