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The Pentagon hosts a dinner for the U.S. bishops

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Last Tuesday, the U.S. bishops' conference gathered at the Marriott in Baltimore. There they were invited to a dinner hosted by U.S. military chaplains. This piqued my curiosity, so I called the U.S. bishops' conference in D.C. "Yes," I was told, "that was the annual dinner for the bishops; the military puts it on. If you want more information, call the Pentagon."

What? The Pentagon throws a dinner for the bishops? Turns out, this has been going on for decades.

I remember an occasion in D.C. in 1984. Fr. Richard McSorley and I put on our finest and walked into U.S. bishops' conference meeting, there to make a suggestion or two about their support for war. This was before the age of security guards and police prowling the halls, quick to toss out or arrest the likes of us. But even then peace and justice groups had no admission to the bishops -- no lobbying allowed, no displays in the halls ways, no soliciting their blessing or support. No group had access, except, that is, the Pentagon.

The Pentagon festooned the hallway, where the bishops couldn't miss it, with flashy posters and displays, glossy tri-folds, photos of chaplains in crisp military uniforms from all the branches -- Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines. The not-so-subtle message: Bishops assign your priests to be chaplains; put them in service to U.S. warmaking. Be all you can be: Bless the war machine.

The Pentagon had bought the bishops off.

In the year 2008, nothing has changed. The same displays shone in the Baltimore Marriott, where the bishops ate their fill, this according to five friends who entered the hotel. The five are part of a group called "Friends of Franz Jagerstatter." They had sent a letter to every U.S. bishop two weeks before the meeting (see: www.franzprayforus.org).

They invoked the Gospel of Jesus and the life of Franz Jagerstatter (beatified last year for his steadfast refusal to fight for the Nazis). And they called the bishops to teach and practice Gospel nonviolence.

They urged the bishops to lead us in "repenting of the sins of war, terrorism and torture; mourning the dead and wounded, and the millions of displaced peoples of Iraq and Afghanistan," and to lead us in "becoming bold teachers of the Gospel of nonviolence, peace and justice. We urge you to condemn war in a loud and clear voice," they wrote.

"We ask you to initiate education programs in every diocese so that young Catholic men and women will be able to form a conscience founded on scripture and not take up the sword in wanton killing and destruction. We call you to begin teaching Catholics that Jesus was nonviolent, and that this call to nonviolence is for all of us. We ask you to remove all ROTC programs from Catholic schools in our country."

As the bishops dined, the five stood in the hallway and held signs quoting Jesus and Pope John Paul II on matters of peace. The police grabbed them in a hurry and escorted them out.

The whole bizarre episode set me thinking of Jesus and his notorious dinner parties. He ate with all the wrong people -- outcasts, prostitutes, public sinners -- and apparently he enjoyed himself, to the scandal of the religious authorities. Jesus always sided with the poor and marginalized. He never dined with the Roman military. He was never waited on by Pilate or Herod. The imperial military, we must remember, executed him.

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The bishops in recent months have spoken scarcely a word about our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, where we are now engaged in horrific daily bombing raids. The wars go on. In 2003 the monthly cost of the war on Iraq totaled \$7 billion; in 2008, the monthly tops \$16 billion, \$720 million a day.

Meanwhile, the U.S. 2009 defense budget exceeds the combined defense budgets of all other countries in the world. The U.S. 2009 "supplemental" budget for Iraq alone is larger than the annual military budgets of Russia, China and Great Britain together.

The recent budget request for 2009 will add another \$170 billion to the Iraq war budget. This same \$170 billion, if it was spent instead here at home in United States, would have done any of the following items:

- hired some 2,342,626 elementary school teachers;
- or provided free healthcare to 49 million Americans;
- or given full scholarships to 22 million university students;
- or built 1,324,340 affordable housing units for low-income people

(From more info, see: <http://www.mapm.org/postcards.htm>)

Which is why we need to keep demanding the wars' end, to push the new administration to bring the war to a speedy close.

While Pentagon officials wined and dined the bishops, some fifty people held a prayer service for peace across town. There Bishop John Michael Botean of the Romanian Catholic Diocese in Canton, Ohio, addressed the crowd. Here, in Bishop Botean, is a high priest of a different stripe. When the war began, he forbade his faithful to participate in the Iraq war under pain of mortal sin.

This is the kind of leadership we need. As they said of Romero in El Salvador, in posters around the countryside, "We want more bishops like him."

In the halls of the Marriott, they read the words of Pope John Paul II from the 2005 World Day of Peace message:

"To attain the good of peace there must be a clear and conscious acknowledgment that violence is an unacceptable evil and that it never solves problems. Violence is a lie. It goes against the truth of our faith, the truth of our humanity, the truth about Jesus. Violence destroys what it claims to defend, the dignity, the life, the freedom of human beings. What is needed is a great effort from consciences and to educate the younger generation to goodness, to nonviolence, to love."

And from a different quarter comes another germane word on the matter. This week's issue of *America* magazine features an article by long time activist Tom Cornell of the Catholic Peace Fellowship. He writes poignantly on the question of military chaplains. We need, he argues, to dismantle the entire program.

I recommend the article, and hope that next year, the bishops might invite peace groups like Pax Christi and the Catholic Worker to display their messages and materials, as well as renounce all connections with the military establishment and rethink their dinner guest list.

This week, John Dear is speaking in Pennsylvania, Florida and Georgia, (at the Carter library in Atlanta and University of Georgia at Athens) about his new autobiography, *A Persistent Peace* (Loyola Press, with a foreword by Martin Sheen), and will attend the SOA protest at Fort Benning. Eerdmans has just

published a collection of his NCR Café essays called, *Put Down the Sword*. Both books are available from www.amazon.com. For further information, see: www.persistentpeace.com and www.johndear.org.

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