

Dom Helder Camara, Presente!

John Dear | Apr. 28, 2009 On the Road to Peace

This week, Orbis books published *Dom Helder Camara: Essential Writings*, an anthology of the charismatic Brazilian archbishop's speeches, poems and essays. It's an essential collection for anyone struggling to live in the church in these times, because this little man with an accent thick as gravy paved the way for liberation theology, base communities and contemporary peacemaking, not only for Brazil and Latin America, but the whole church. His lessons and insights are needed more than ever.



Author of several books, including *The Desert Is Fertile*, *Spiral of Violence*, *Hoping Against*

All Hope and *A Thousand Reasons for Living*, a spectacular preacher and passionate speaker, and nominee more than a few times for the Nobel Peace Prize, Dom Helder Camara was born in Fortaleza, Brazil, on Feb. 7, 1909, ordained archbishop of Recife in 1964, espoused nonviolence under the tutelage of Hildegard Goss-Mayr and helped form Brazil's grass-roots base community movement, which today comprises more than a hundred thousand communities. As the primary organizer of the 1968 Latin American bishops' conference in Medellin, he was the first to promote the Gospel notion of "the preferential option for the poor." And he pressed to make it church policy.

For 20 years he campaigned tirelessly against Brazil's military dictatorship, often under death threats, and now and then enduring attempts on his life. The regime banned him from public speaking for 13 years and prohibited newspapers from printing his name. In 1985, the Vatican forced him to retire and dismantled every one of his programs of justice and peace. Still, until his death in 1999 he shined as a symbol of what the church could be -- an uncompromised stronghold of hope, justice and love.

His famous dictums still ring true and always will. "When I feed the poor, they call me a saint. But when I ask why there are poor, they call me a Communist." "Denunciation of injustice is an absolutely essential chapter in the proclamation of the Gospel. And not merely a duty for the few. It is a human duty for everyone, a Christian duty for all Christians, and an absolute duty for the shepherds."

Edited by Francis McDonagh, this collection includes an excellent introduction. Through it, Dom Helder's true greatness emerges in stages and his sterling character leaves one shocked. We simply have no one to compare him to today -- except our own Thomas Gumbleton. One is shocked, too, by the peerlessness of Dom Helder's ideas. He concludes, for instance, that no longer can institutions contribute to the well-being of the world. Only

in "Abrahamic minorities," as he called them, in small assemblies like peace and justice groups can the Gospel fire of love and peace be kept tended and fanned.

One is shocked, too, by the strenuousness of his striving. The book contains many poems and meditations, which he wrote between 2 and 5 every morning -- sweet fruit of the prayerful vigil he sustained over his life. (When he died, friends discovered more than seven thousand poem meditations in his room. Only a few have been published.) Behind this massive yield was his claim to be "always seeing the unclouded Christ." From my own time with him, I believe it.

I met him first at the Nevada Test Site in 1991. Some thousand peacemakers had gathered shortly after the first Gulf war and there in the vast desert, snow-capped mountains in the distance, Dom Helder stood in the circle we formed and offered a homily. He was a frail old man, short and rotund in his brown cassock and black beret. As he preached, his English sagged a bit under his heavy Portuguese accent. But his words lifted our spirits.

"My dear brothers and sisters," he said, "let us make every possible effort to help love grow among humanity. ... Let us be an example to create strong families of love that help each other, so that we can love one another. Let us live without war and be peacemakers, the true children of God, that we may never have opulent riches or degrading misery. Let us all be sisters and brothers, children of the same loving God, sisters and brothers of Jesus our brother."

Then he laid aside his notes, removed his glasses, raised both arms to heaven and called out, "My brothers and sisters, please, no more war! No more war!" He lifted his face to the sky and cried out: "Dear God, we want peace. We really want peace." Then he raised his right hand, paused and waved -- to the sky, to God! He had unabashedly given voice to our deepest yearnings, and then turned away quietly, his head down, crying. The crowd gasped; it was an unforgettable moment. The homily concluded, 75 of us processed to the line in the sand -- the threshold of the forbidden zone. We stepped into it and submitted to arrest.

A few days later, a few friends and I hosted Dom Helder at my small Jesuit community in Oakland. I took the occasion to throw together my best soup and salad. In return he presented me with a Brazilian peace T-shirt. My friend Tom asked him about his view on the ordination of women. Dom Helder looked at us with a mischievous smile, and then asked: "Do you mean to say that Mary the Mother of God cannot be ordained?" We erupted in laughter. Of course, he was for the ordination of women.

That week I interviewed him for a peace journal. I posed my questions, he offered profound responses. And in the midst of the proceedings, more than a few times he stopped and launched into a passionate prayer, as if God were in the next chair. With eyes wide open, he praised God's loving ways, then begged for an end war and poverty. His single-mindedness left me challenged and moved. (I was glad to read that many who spent time with him were equally confounded.)

It was a busy week for Dom Helder, but he was used to it. His sponsors penciled in a full agenda. One night he spoke at a church in Berkeley, a large gathering eager to hear. During question-and-answer time, one student rose to ask: "Dom Helder, you've survived an assassination attempt, faced soldiers at your door, endured death threats, been ridiculed throughout South America, and been ostracized by the hierarchical church. From all your experiences, what would you say has been your greatest obstacle to peace?"

Dom Helder let a long silence pass then pointed his finger toward the sky. With all the showmanship of a ringmaster, he turned it slowly down back toward his heart. "I am my own greatest obstacle to peace!" he replied. A reverent hush fell on the crowd.

His words had that effect on many who heard him. "Obviously, while I love all," he wrote early on, "I must, like Christ, have a special love for the poor. At the last judgment, we shall all be judged by the treatment we have

given to Christ, to Christ in the person of those who are hungry or thirsty, who are dirty, wounded, and oppressed." And: "My personal vocation is to be a pilgrim of peace. Personally I would prefer a thousand times more to be killed than to kill anyone."

Of course, among those in power, his words stirred something else -- hatred. He answered the door one day to find a man before him, a hired killer, gun drawn. "I have come to assassinate you, Dom Helder." Dom Helder responded with the equanimity of Gandhi. "Then you will send me straight to the Lord." Simple, poignant fearlessness. For that moment it confounded hatred and befuddled violence. The man lowered the gun and let loose his tears. "I can't kill you," the man sobbed. "You belong to God."

"Let us open our eyes," he wrote in one prayer. "Let us begin at once to fight our selfishness and come out of ourselves, to dedicate ourselves once and for all, whatever the sacrifices, to the nonviolent struggle for a more just and a more human world. Let us not put off the decision till tomorrow. Let us begin today, now, intelligently and firmly. Let us recognize our brothers and sisters who are called, like us, to give up their ease and join all those who hunger for the truth and who have sworn to give their lives to make peace through justice and love."

I urge you to get this book and let it renew you. Dom Helder's life and witness stand in sharp contrast to most church leaders today. His leadership is of another order entirely. May his example give us hope and new strength.

St. Anthony Messenger Press has just published *John Dear On Peace*, by Patricia Normile. John's latest books are *A Persistent Peace* (Loyola Press) and *Put Down Your Sword*, (Eerdmans). He will speak at the April 29th peace vigil in front of the White House (www.christianpeacewitness.org) and May 1-2 at the Northwest Catholic Women's Conference in Seattle. See: www.johndear.org for more details.

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