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Bishop Matthiesen, Teacher of Peace

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Several hundred people gathered in a Chicago hotel this weekend for the annual Pax Christi assembly. There we met other activists, renewed old friendships, and took energy from inspiring speakers. Mostly, we pondered the theme laid out in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s final sermon, "Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution." He preached it at Washington's National Cathedral, four days before an assassin's bullet struck him down.

King's sermon evoked the image of Rip Van Winkle's 20-year sleep. "One of the great liabilities of life is that too many people find themselves living amid a great period of social change, and yet they fail to develop the new attitudes, the new mental responses, that the new situation demands. They end up sleeping through a revolution!"

The sermon bore the rhetorical richness that only Dr. King could summon. "We must all learn to live together as brothers and sisters," Dr. King said, explaining the revolution of Gospel nonviolence, "or we will all perish together as fools ..."

"We have difficult days ahead in the struggle for justice and peace, but I will not yield to the politics of despair. I'm going to maintain hope."

It was a spangled weekend of inspiration and wisdom. But the pinnacle of our time together was to hear from 88-year-old Bishop Leroy Matthiesen, winner of this year's Paul VI Teacher of Peace Award. He was the notorious bishop of Amarillo, Texas, who once raised a contrary voice to the people of his diocese. He said told the Catholics who worked at the Pantex nuclear weapons plant "in the name of the God of peace, quit your jobs."

He embodied the words of Dr. King: He refused to yield to despair; he maintained hope.

Matthiesen was an ordinary parish priest, a Texas farm boy in his youth. And he was elevated to the bishopric just as Reagan declared his intention of converting Texas's Pantex into a manufacturer of neutron bombs. The bishop, new to the job and still pristine, took pen in hand and addressed his people. Such weapons -- neutron and nuclear -- are immoral, he wrote. Leave the place and do more life-affirming work. And, he added, the diocese will try to provide financial assistance.

There followed an immense uproar. *The New York Times* put his story on page one. News programs across the country called and pleaded. Hate mail came in. But he told me that in greater numbers came letters of support and, often with them, generous donations. Turned out, the controversial stand of this bishop still wet behind the ears inspired countless people. The rolls of the anti-nuclear movement swelled. Pressure descended on the U.S. bishops to compose a peace pastoral letter.

Quite a storm, and rich outcome. And it began through modest means. "I remember one morning reading a verse in the Psalms, 'A vain hope for safety is the war horse. Despite its power it cannot save.' I don't know what made me do it, but I immediately thought, 'A vain hope for safety is the nuclear weapon. Despite its power, it cannot save!'" He spoke of it as a wake up call.

Just as that seed was planted, peace activists reached out to him, those who for years had tirelessly demonstrated and wrote about the evils of nuclear arsenals. They found the new bishop to have a sympathetic ear. And so the bishop issued his call, more like an alarm clock warning.

The offer went out to thousands of Pantex employees. Only one accepted, however -- Eloy Ramos, who worked on the dock where the weapons are loaded onto trucks and trains. He left with the diocese's help and started a fence business.

The bishop's address paused at this point, as he pointed Eloy out and had him stand. He stood with a shy grin while the rest of us jumped to our feet and offered him a rousing ovation.

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"Are you glad you did what you did?" I asked Eloy when we visited with the bishop. "Yes," he said. "God has blessed me."

Applause for Eloy went on at length then subsided finally, and then Matthiesen concluded: "Help make the church a voice for peace. Make it a model for peace. Do all you can to work for the abolition of nuclear weapons. Be encouraged by Jesus and our cloud of witnesses, from Oscar Romero to Dr. King."

Next week, I'll be joining hundreds of Pax Christi New Mexico friends in Santa Fe and Los Alamos for our annual Hiroshima day witness for peace. Like Matthiesen, we'll call upon the employees of Los Alamos National Laboratories to quit their jobs.

But as we remember Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Afghanistan and Pakistan, Iraq and Iran, we ask every Christian to follow Matthiesen's summons and issue the call far and wide: Quit!

Quit the Army, Navy, Air Force and National Guard. Abandon the Pentagon. Walk away from Livermore and Sandias Labs. Give notice to Oak Ridge and Pantex. Turn your back on that murky alphabet soup of subterfuge and surveillance -- the CIA, the FBI and the NSA. Cooperate not a whit with any and all imperial forces of violence.

To quit is to awake; to awake is to perceive. So wake up, as Dr. King urged us long ago. Shake the cobwebs, rub the eyes. Make life-affirming choices. That was the message this weekend: time to get up and join the gentle revolution of Gospel nonviolence.

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Other highlights from the weekend:

Kathy Kelly stirred us with tales of her visit last month to Pakistan, where she documented the killing of innocents by U.S. drones. "Dr. King calls us to see the humanity in those we see as adversaries," she said.

Claudette Werleigh, former prime minister of Haiti and now secretary general of Pax Christi International, challenged us to make true President Obama's vision of a nuclear-free world. "The goal is within reach," she said. And Dave Robinson, Pax Christi's director, laid out the path for making that dream come true, urging us in particular to push the Senate this fall to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

Sharon Astyk spoke of our having passed the moment of peak oil. Our highest rate of extraction has passed us by. From now on, it will proceed at ever declining rates, a grim prospect for the industrialized world. "We need to begin now to prepare for a new type of society, especially by starting organic gardens, eating locally, and learning to do without our cars," she said.

Tom Andrews of Win Without War (www.winwithoutwar.org) laid out reasons we must leave Afghanistan and Pakistan if we hope to end terrorism. Stephanie Garza talked of our unjust crackdown on immigrant families. Tom Cordaro spoke of the war on terror, that we can combat it by "living unafraid" and going forward in peace. Day long anti-racism workshops and a young adults retreat also energized people.

Ernesto Cortes Jr., a leader of the Industrial Areas Foundation and one of the nation's greatest community organizers, relied on the book of Exodus to exhort us to become organizers like Moses. Let Moses' example, he said, nudge others beyond our comfort zones and liberate each other to act. All change requires organizing, he said.

Good Bishop Gabino Zavala, president of Pax Christi USA, thanked us at Mass for working for peace and justice, for not giving up -- and a most poignant word -- for staying with the church.

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For more information on the annual Pax Christi witness at Los Alamos on July 31 and Aug. 1, featuring two Nobel Peace Prize winners, see: www.paxchristinewmexico.org. John's latest books, *Put Down Your Sword* (Eerdmans) and *A Persistent Peace* (Loyola Press) are available from www.amazon.com. For information on his speaking schedule or to invite him to speak at a church or school, see: www.johndear.org.

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A message from John Dear about his *NCR* columns

Dear Friends,

Thank you very much for reading and supporting my weekly column. Each week about 2,500 people read

these columns. We would like to double that by the end of the year. Would you please send this e-mail to 10 friends and ask them to sign up?

Any other outreach you can give to promote this column would be greatly appreciated. Here's a **direct link to the e-mail sign up**.

Thanks, too, for all you do for justice, disarmament and peace, for teaching and practicing Gospel nonviolence.

God bless you,
Fr. John Dear, SJ

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