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New Zealand diary

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Wednesday, Oct. 28

I left Honolulu Monday evening and arrived in Auckland, New Zealand this morning. Somewhere over the Pacific, I lost a day, a disconcerting experience. But it was a thrill to land in one of the world's remotest corners to meet some of the world's friendliest people in the perhaps the most anti-nuclear nation on earth.

New Zealand has over four million people on two large islands the size of Japan, and is known for kiwi birds, Sir Edmund Hillary, The Lord of the Rings, green hills, sharp cliffs, the spectacular southern Alps, idyllic beaches and lakes, but most of all, its warm people. It has over 11,000 miles of coastland. Auckland, the largest city at 1.1 million, sits up north, where it's warmer.

I flew on to Wellington, the capital, certainly one of the most picturesque cities in the world, at the southern end of the north island. Spring is bursting out everywhere, but it was windy. There I met Amber, my host and the organizer of my trip. She and her husband Nathan, a Presbyterian pastor, took me to lunch and a brief tour. The gorgeous bays, green cliffs, endless blue water were stunning, especially the distant snow covered mountaintops of the Southern Alps, which looked like they were floating over the ocean.

We drove north along the ocean to Paraparauma, where 30 Maori people, the NZ indigenous, led an hour long traditional welcome ceremony for me, called a 'powhiri.' They sang, danced and gave speeches in the native language. Then, during their 'exchange of peace,' I walked along the greeting line, and in a rite that goes back hundreds of years, grabbed each person's arm, gently rubbed noses with each person, looked them in the eye for a moment, and shared the same breath. Afterwards I spoke and we had tea. A

royal welcome to New Zealand!

When the Maori first came here, 700 years ago (probably from eastern Polynesia in large ocean-going canoes), they called the land "Aotearoa," "the land of the long white cloud." Their history is slightly better than the indigenous of Australia. Today Maori culture, language and traditions are celebrated everywhere in an exciting national renaissance.

In Waikanae, I was welcomed at a Christian community and retreat center called "Ngatiawa," or "River Tribe," ("People of the River") founded by Justin and Jenny, longtime Christian activists who serve the poor. After years among the urban poor, they moved out to the hillsides along the ocean where they set up a retreat center and farm on 14 acres. I joined 40 friends for dinner and evening prayer before a discussion about peace and justice work in the US and NZ.

I was deeply moved by their Christian spirit and community -- part Catholic Worker, part Benedictine monastery, part Gandhian ashram. I felt like Frodo returning home to the Shire, but these are not mere Hobbits. While showing me the new community chapel which they are building by hand, Jenny pointed out three large wooden beams which support the little wooden structure. "They represent the three pillars of our community," she said. "Nourish the Christ center within. Build the community of Christ together. And reach out and serve Christ in the world's suffering and needy." Beautiful!

Justin told an amazing story about the developments of 1985. Apparently, politicians in Parliament decided secretly one Friday night that the following Monday morning, they would take a symbolic vote about the presence of U.S. military ships with nuclear weapons off the coast, to register their discomfort. But news leaked out to a peace activist who immediately gathered four friends at his home, told them to bring the phone number of every person they knew, put out food and coffee, and led them over the next 48 hours to call everyone they could think of to do something. That Monday morning, when the Parliamentarians showed up for work, they each had 1,000 telegrams waiting for them. And with that, New Zealand boldly voted to ban U.S. nuclear ships and nuclear weapons from the islands forever. Bravo!

Thursday

After a good rest, meals and community prayer, I was off to downtown Wellington to join the monthly peace vigil against U.S. warmaking outside the U.S. Embassy. Wellington is settled on a beautiful harbor, where there's an impressive national museum (called "Te Papa," "Our Place") which I enjoyed, as well as various theaters, restaurants, town hall and Parliament, with its strange round building known as the "Beehive."

But the U. S. Embassy is a fortress, the most fortified place in the city, perhaps the country. It symbolizes U.S. imperialism, as every U.S. embassy does. New Zealanders recently learned that its government has secretly sent several hundred soldiers into Afghanistan, to support Obama's war, and concern and opposition are growing.

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Thirty of us gathered for our peace vigil and picnic. It was a wonderful group that included Fr. Jerry, the vicar-general of the diocese of Wellington, who was recently arrested for a protest against the Israeli war on Gaza. I celebrated a Mass for peace and spoke of the need to carry on Jesus' prophetic witness for peace. At the end of Mass, we extended our hands and offered a blessing on U.S. Embassy employees, that they would non-cooperate with U.S. warmaking.

Then, we drove to a downtown church where I gave a lecture on justice, disarmament, nonviolence and Jesus. I encouraged the crowd to carry on their anti-nuclear work, to be a beacon of nonviolence to the world, to keep following Jesus on the road to peace. Afterwards, I headed off to the countryside for two nights at the Catholic Worker Farm.

Friday

The Catholic Worker Farm in Otaki (called in Maori "The Blossoming of Love and Forgiveness") was founded by a wonderful couple named Adrian and Shelley Leeson. Together they are raising and home-schooling seven children while serving the poor and living close to the land. Their model farm is way off the grid. They grow their own food and the children dumpster-dive for the rest. They haven't been to a shopping center or grocery store in two years. The family cooked a traditional Maori feast and some 50 guests joined us throughout the day for the feast and conversation about peacemaking and discipleship. I enjoyed walking through the farm, sitting by the river, and meeting their creatures, especially an impressive long-haired, big, fat pig named "Gorgeous."

Last year, Adi, as he is known, with two friends, Sam and Fr. Peter, a Dominican priest, walked onto a NZ military base near Blenheim and engaged in the nation's first Plowshares disarmament action. They cut through a series of electric wire fences and came upon a massive radar satellite dish. There, they cut the outer vinyl cover, which came crashing to the ground, then prayed for nearly two hours before they were arrested. Their action drew widespread public interest. Along the way, they learned that the satellite dish helps monitor the situation in Afghanistan and gather information, which is then passed on to U.S. forces to determine their bombing raids. The three plowshares activists are scheduled for a trial next March in Wellington and face seven years in prison.

The kind and gentle Fr. Peter, age 70, hitchhiked 15 hours from Auckland to join us. Together, we discussed the plowshares movement, the need to resist our governments' warmaking, and preparations for jail. Another long time justice activist and friend, Fr. Jim from Christchurch, shared his work to promote restorative justice in NZ. Throughout the day, we took walks, enjoyed the countryside, played with the children, and prayed for peace. A memorable day with the best of New Zealand!

Saturday

I spent this morning in a Wellington home visiting a wonderful group of young Christians who are part of the "Urban Vision" movement. As a community, they promise to stay close to Jesus, live in the poorest neighborhoods, support themselves with part time jobs, serve the poor, own few possessions and meet together regularly. Over tea and coffee, they asked for help about living a nonviolent life, being a peaceful presence in a violent neighborhood, and encouraging their churches to take a stand against war, poverty and nuclear weapons. It was a good exchange, and once again, I was moved and inspired by New Zealand's gentle young people, trying so hard to follow Jesus.

This afternoon, I flew far south to Dunedin, the university town, where I was met by my host Fr. Mark Chamberlain. The flight took me over the channel along the east coast of the South Island. I saw long beautiful beaches, endless green hills and fields, and in the distance, the majestic Southern Alps. New Zealand, to me, is part Vancouver, British Columbia, Ireland, Scotland, the California coast, and Hawaii -- all rolled into one. It lives up to its reputation as a kind of Edenic paradise.

Sunday

Dunedin is another picturesque city spread out around a series of bays opening to the ocean. Not far away,

at least to my mind, lies Antarctica. If Christchurch is little England, Dunedin is little Scotland. The University of Otago, with its 30,000 students, appears to be the heart of the city. Good Father Mark wears many hats. He's a widely-respected, energetic university chaplain, who also serves as pastor to several parishes and hospital chaplain. Mark is my age, and has lived all his life in these southlands. After lunch downtown with several coworkers, we drove along the coast of the glorious Otago peninsula to explore the green hills, rocky beaches, and ocean vistas. I was stunned by the coastal beauty, especially at Taiaaroa Head where I watched the seagulls and colony of rare black and white royal Albatrosses. New Zealand must be the most beautiful place on earth.

Several New Zealanders have told me they like living far away from the world's hustle and bustle, especially New York, Washington and Rome. I wonder: does the distance, and the extravagant beauty, make it easier to be more peaceable, and to stand up against the U.S. empire?

Mark and I discussed our shared love of Ignatian spirituality and our passion for Jesus. At one point he confessed that he recently received a letter from a leading bishop announcing that he was in next line to become a bishop, but they wanted to know if he obeyed the church's teaching against the ordination of women. "Of course, I support the ordination of women," Mark wrote right back. "We're all created in the image of God. Besides, we need all the help we can get!" That was the end of that.

Tonight I celebrated the large student Mass for All Saints Day, and spoke about our common calling to become peacemaking saints who live the Beatitudes as our path to God. Afterwards, a crowd remained for a question and answer/discussion session. Then, I stayed up late enjoying a fine meal with several sisters and students at Mark's house. Another great day.

Monday

After a morning meeting with some of the faculty, I gave my lecture at the university, on the "Martyrs, Saints and Heroes of Peace," following on All Saints Day. I spoke about Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Franz Jagerstatter, Dr. King and my own experience with the Jesuit martyrs of El Salvador, the Berrigans, and other saints, as well as our calling to follow the nonviolent Jesus in his work to abolish war, poverty and nuclear weapons and become peacemaking saints.

Dr. Kevin Clements, director of the National Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, introduced me. I had the chance to ask him my question about New Zealanders. "We have a long tradition of nonviolent resistance, especially against the Vietnam war and apartheid," he said emphatically. "Our stand against U.S. nuclear weapons was actually our attempt to engage the world, to offer a New Zealand perspective. So peace and nonviolence are part of our history." And yet New Zealand has a disturbingly high rate of domestic violence, another colleague added, which needs to be addressed and resolved.

After lunch, Fr. Mark and Fr. Kevin drove me around the stunning Otago bay to the site of one of New Zealand's historic nonviolent resistance campaigns. The Maori nonviolently resisted British forces in the late 19th century, and the resisters were brought here and imprisoned in a cave along the water. Many died; others survived two dreadful years. There at the cave along the water, we offered a prayer for peace, that the spirit of these great indigenous nonviolent resisters would live on in us and New Zealand. My friends gave me a blessing and sent me off on a flight to Christchurch, then on to Auckland for an interview with *New Zealand Catholic*.

Tuesday, Nov. 3

This morning, I fly from Auckland to Australia for a series of talks and a retreat, "The School of Prophets," this weekend in Adelaide. My pilgrimage to New Zealand comes to a close, and I'm full of

gratitude for these beautiful days. I'm astounded by the beauty of this land, its mountains, fields and coastline, but even more, by the beauty of its people. It's a whole nation of what Paul Farmer's mother calls "GNPs," "genuinely nice people." I count myself blessed to have met these gentle, humble, loving people, and hope they will continue to be a light of peace and disarmament for the world.

This week, John is speaking in Adelaide, Australia and leading a retreat, "The School of Prophets." His books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down the Sword*, along with Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace* are available from www.amazon.com. This month, Orbis will publish John's new collection, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*. For information, or to schedule a speaking event, see: www.johndear.org

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