

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

February 16, 2010 at 10:17am

Lent and the Charter for Compassion

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

As the Holy Season of Lent begins, we put on ashes once again and repent of the mortal sins of war, greed, nuclear weapons and empire -- national sins for which each of us is responsible. Yes, we must repent, and we must make repentance and conversion to Jesus' loving nonviolence a way of life, if we are to remain human during inhuman times. Preserving what is human is our hope, our calling, our political future, our salvation.

Lent is a time for personal and societal repentance, a time for radical conversion, renewal and transformation, wrote my friend Art Laffin of the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker in Washington, D.C., last week.

Living under the brutal occupation of the Roman empire, Jesus declared: "The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel." (Mk.1:15) Living in the U.S. empire, which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. described as "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world," we need to heed Jesus' proclamation now more than ever.

Art invites us to join the annual Catholic Worker Ash Wednesday service of repentance in front of the White House and, every Friday during Lent, a weekly vigil for peace.

The purpose of this witness is to call for repentance and conversion of ourselves, our society and yes, our churches, to the Gospel way of justice, nonviolence and a reverence for all life and creation, Art continues.

We call for an immediate end to the sinful wars being carried out in our name. We call, too, for reparations for Iraq and Afghanistan; for total disarmament, the abolition of all nuclear and conventional weapons, and an end to the militarization of space; an end to the

Israeli occupation of the West Bank; an end to torture and the closing of Guantanamo and Bagram, U.S. military prisons and other military torture training centers like the SOA/WHINSEC; the eradication of poverty; universal health care; unlimited aid and assistance to help rebuild Haiti; a just economic order; and climate justice. We call for the proposed FY 2011 \$708 billion military budget, which includes \$7 billion to upgrade the U.S. nuclear arsenal, to be converted to meet urgent human needs.

The late Howard Zinn once wrote: "What matters most is not who is sitting in the White House, but who is sitting in?" -- and who is marching outside the White House pushing for change.?"

Art and other D.C. friends make Lent a time, not just to give up desserts, but of public witness. For their Lenten practice, they stand up publicly, call for an end to our nation's imperial violence, and practice the Gospel alternative of nonviolence.

How can we mark Lent? While it's good to give up sweets (and eat healthy!), I hope we can all make similar efforts during these forty days to join local campaigns of Lenten repentance and conversion to Gospel nonviolence. That may mean attending a weekly peace vigil, giving time each week to write to politicians and the media, meeting with local church leaders, or joining some national event to protest our wars and weapons.

The practice should help us to accompany in spirit the nonviolent Jesus who walks from the desert -- where he rejects the temptations to violence -- to Jerusalem, where he confronts the structures of violence and gives his life for humanity through loving nonviolence. Somehow, we need to walk with him, share his spirit, take up his cross, and carry on his work of compassion and peace.

Compassion is at the heart of things. Last month a priest friend on Prince Edward Island told me that at all his weekend Masses he recently read the Charter for Compassion, drafted by Karen Armstrong and other religious leaders. He did it, he said, to encourage everyone to reflect anew on their own compassion as a way to renew their discipleship, as a measure of their spiritual life.

So off I went and looked it up, the Charter for Compassion, which Sr. Joan Chittister has **written about for the National Catholic Reporter**. It declares that compassion lies at the heart of every major religion. It's the link to our basic humanity, the key to an authentic spiritual life.

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So perhaps one way to enter more deeply into the holy season of Lent is to reflect on compassion and to experiment with it, as we advocate for a more just world; also to see how we can promote social compassion, to help us as church people become a truly nonviolent community.

In the wake of the horrific earthquake in Haiti, that has left some 240,000 dead and millions wounded, our country and the world have shown compassion. There has been a global outpouring of concern, donations, and solidarity. But the Charter goes further. It says that compassion mustn't hinge on disaster but must be the central focus of our lives.

We can't offer compassion on the one hand and on the other, simultaneously support the bombing of children of Iraq and Afghanistan, build nuclear weapons, vote for the death penalty, and remain silent in the face of corporate greed, global climate change, and systemic injustice. That's not the compassion of Jesus.

Compassion comes from our experience of God's love, nonviolence and mercy. Especially in Lent, we try to grow more aware of God's compassion, nonviolence and love toward us in our ordinary day to day lives, and then, spread that compassion, nonviolence and love toward others. God's compassion melts our hearts and leads us to share that same compassionate, nonviolent love. Compassion is shown through our actions toward others, but if we're all doing our job, should lead to new nonviolent structures, laws that favor the poor, and finally, a more just world. This social compassion should disarm hearts and nations.

For example, social compassion might impel lending nations to cancel Haiti's \$890 million debt -- and the debt of every Third World nation. Thus we'll move toward greater social and economic justice and institutionalize reconciliation.

So while Art and our friends keep vigil outside the White House, while Jesus undertakes his Lenten journey to Jerusalem, we'll let the spirit of nonviolence and compassion deepen within us, take public steps to stand up on behalf of those in need, offer concrete assistance, and advocate for a new world without war, poverty, nuclear weapons and global climate change. In other words, during Lent, we try to become more and more like the nonviolent, compassionate Jesus.

As we embark on forty days of Lenten nonviolence and compassion, I offer here below the interfaith-based Charter of Compassion in the hopes that it resonates in our hearts and inspires us to spend Lent repenting of violence, becoming more compassionate and nonviolent -- individually, nationally, globally.

The Charter for Compassion

The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves.

Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the center of our world and put another there, and to honor the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

It is also necessary in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism, or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others -- even our enemies -- is a denial of our common humanity. We acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion.

We therefore call upon all men and women ~ to restore compassion to the center of morality and religion ~ to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate ~ to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures ~ to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity ~ to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings -- even those regarded as enemies.

We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world. Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries. Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled

humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.?

To contribute to Catholic Relief Services? ?Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund,? go to:
<http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. John?s upcoming retreats include: ?The Road to Peace,? March 5-6, Atlanta, Ga., see: <http://www.paxchrististjude.webs.com/Home.html> ?The Gospel According to John,? April 30-May 2, near Stroudsburg, PA, see www.kirkridge.org and ?Gandhi, King, Day and Merton,? at Ghost Ranch Center, Abiquiu, NM, see www.ghostranch.org. John?s latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), along with other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile?s *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. For further information, or to schedule a lecture, go to www.johndear.org.

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