

Peace vigil at Los Alamos

John Dear | Mar. 2, 2010 | On the Road to Peace

On Sunday, 50 of us stood an hour in the snow, rain and hail for a simple peace vigil at the Los Alamos National Labs in New Mexico. There we protested the Obama Administration's new state-of-the-art plutonium bomb factory (the CMRR) and prayed for the abolition of nuclear weapons.

Our gathering was not unlike the scores of peace vigils that occur each week across the country -- on street corners, in front of Federal Buildings, and at military installations.

But this particular gathering was the culmination of the annual Pacific Life Community weekend retreat, held amid the red rocks of the Jemez mountains near Jemez Pueblo, N.M. Each year, activists of faith and conscience from across the West Coast gather to pray, study, reflect, compare notes and build community.

What makes these retreats unique is that they end, not with a private liturgy, but with a public witness at some major U.S. military site. Two years ago I attended the gathering at Vandenberg Air Force Base in Central California; last year friends gathered at the Trident Submarine Base in Bangor, Washington. And now Los Alamos.

Protests at Los Alamos are rare, even though, in my opinion, it is the most evil place on earth. Nuclear weapons inflict the greatest terrorism; they are the ultimate terrorist threat. It follows like an Aristotelian syllogism: Los Alamos, therefore, is the ultimate terrorist training camp.

On Sunday, going to Los Alamos felt particularly dangerous -- not just because we were under hot police and FBI surveillance, but because of the ice and snow. It made for treacherous driving up the mountainous road, on the teetering edge of staggering cliffs. I confess to an excess amount of worry as my jeep made it up the incline, my knuckles white and pulse racing. But once at the summit, I found it a blessing to be among friends in prayer.

Along the way, I drove past the Church of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, which always breaks my own heart. There, out front, she stands -- Mary in bronze holding her heart in her hand. Near the entranceway bubbles a little pool for peace, worth thousands, a tribute to St. Francis. In honor of Mother Teresa nearby sits a beautiful stone bench. Etched on the side: "The greatest destroyer of peace today is abortion."

Every Sunday the parishioners pass by and eye the monuments they've erected and complaisantly regard themselves as pro-lifers. But come Monday, back to work they go, back to the Labs, oblivious of the deadly work they do. A staggering incongruity. The Labs are staffed by vast numbers of Christians, church-goers of all sorts, a goodly number of them Catholic, yet their work blasphemes the God who calls us to make peace.

As for our motley assortment of protesters, passersby must have dismissed us as a foolish lot. But to the extent that we acted, as best we might, in unconditional love, in creative nonviolence, in heartfelt prayer, then our effectiveness cannot be measured. It can't be measured any more than the Mass or the sacraments can be measured. Who can gauge the transcendent? All sacramental actions are, first and foremost, life-changing, disarming and healing for those who participate. And the promise stands. Our actions will bear good fruit in

God's good time.

One can't help but wonder, though, how makers of homicidal weapons keep it up. How do they suppress inevitable nagging doubts? Turns out the Labs spend a fortune on sophisticated PR campaigns -- "to keep up the morale of the workers," we've been told. The slogans and jingles -- "Where Discoveries Are Made" is the latest, hanging from banners on telephone posts throughout town -- they're meant to persuade employees that they provide the last line of security for the nation, that *they* are the true peacemakers.

More, things are so tightly arranged -- tasks and knowledge -- as to create a sense of diffusion. No one feels accountable for the Bomb; the work is carefully and finely divided up, responsibility spread thin. And that's why we come. Our modest presence, we hope, breaks the veneer, sheds a light, names the work as evil. We come to call everyone to accept responsibility for this evil work -- beginning with ourselves.

While gathered at the foot of the towering snowy mountains, I walked around and asked friends why they had made the journey. "I came because the threatened increase in nuclear weapons has to be stopped, and this is the key place to start," said Betsy Lamb of Bend, Oregon.

"This is the heart of the nuclear threat," said Franciscan Fr. Jerry Zawada of Tucson, Ariz., "and the nuclear threat is the ultimate slap in the face of God, so I've come to join with those who yearn for the end of the nuclear threat."

"I came with my two children, Rozella, age 10, and Thomas, age 9, to witness for life and a new future of peace for them," said Tensie Hernandez of Beatitude House, in Guadalupe, Calif.

"I came here because I think our country was conceived and born in violence, and continues to expand itself as an empire of violence," said Larry Purcell of Redwood City, Calif. "The weapons produced here are the ultimate nightmare of violence. So I'm here to protest the notion that weapons which threaten the species give us security."

"I'm here to help bring about a culture of life and to show that there are other ways to participate in our system besides casting a vote," said Allison McGillivray, a young Catholic Worker from Southern California.

"The only future is a non-nuclear future, so I've come here to let my voice be heard," said Bryce Fisher, a young Catholic Worker from Half Moon Bay, Calif.

"In this critical year for nuclear disarmament, it's important that people in the U.S. show the world that we want to disarm the nuclear arsenal," said Felice Cohen-Joppa of Tucson, Ariz., (director of www.nuclearresister.org). "So I'm here today to take personal responsibility for protesting and resisting my country's nuclear weapons. We have to disarm now."

"I'm here because it doesn't make sense to invest four and a half billion dollars in a new nuclear weapons building [the CMRR] when we have so many other needs, such as healthcare, schools, jobs, housing and renewal energy and efficiency," said Joni Arends, director of Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety (see: www.nuclearactive.org)

"I think it's about time we got serious about reducing our nuclear weapons and working for nuclear disarmament," said Ellie Voutselas of Santa Fe. "As a member of Pax Christi, it's part of our mission to advocate for nuclear disarmament."

"Here at Los Alamos, they're preparing to obliterate the planet with no conscious knowledge of what they're doing," said Dominican Sr. Jackie Hudson of Poulsbo, Wash. "Every aspect of the nuclear issue means death to

the planet. We must find a better way. We must put our money to life-giving activities.?

As we concluded our vigil, we stood in a large circle, held hands and for some 15 minutes prayed in silence. The snow grew heavier, but our hearts kept warm. The gathering, the gesture, the hope we derived from it -- it was all blessing.

Afterwards, 17 friends walked toward the area where the new CMRR bomb factory will be built. They wanted simply to say a prayer for disarmament, but they had crossed a line and faced arrest. This time, the head of security let them pass, and they offered their illegal prayer for peace.

Each Lent, we hear Jesus call us to repentance and conversion, and we try to follow him anew on the path of Gospel nonviolence. This year, in these terrible times, may the peace vigils continue, as well as the peace prayers and the peace actions. Undoubtedly, our prayers will be answered, our hearts will be disarmed, one day our weapons will be dismantled. And the blessings of peace will fall upon us all like mountain snow.

To contribute to Catholic Relief Services? ?Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund,? go to:

<http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. On March 4, John will speak in Lexington, Ky., and on March 5-6, lead a retreat, ?The Road to Peace,? in Atlanta, Ga., (see: www.paxchrististjude.webs.com) He will also lead ?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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