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Blessed Fr. Jerzy

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

I was in Toronto this past weekend, speaking at a church conference with my friend Fr. Roy Bourgeois, leader of the campaign to close the "School of Americas," where the U.S. army trains soldiers of oligarchies in southern hemisphere to repress the indigenous people. And also Bishop Alvero Ramazzini of San Marcos, Guatemala, a bold champion for social justice who is under constant death threat. Two rare species.

At one point, Roy asked: "Why are so many priests and bishops silent in the face of injustice and war when the teachings of Jesus call so clearly for justice and peace?" The question seemed to burn through everyone there, and it lingered in the air during our time together. For three days we all pondered together: What is the church's role in the world? In this time of scandal and abusive power, what is the role of the priest? What is our role, what does the Gospel of Jesus require of us?

The questions are timely. And if we look, we see them answered. On Sunday June 6 in Poland, the church will beatify the martyred priest Jerzy Popeluszko. To the Polish, who recently lost their president and some of their officials in a plane crash, the feast of Fr. Jerzy feels like a gift. But the whole church can claim it. Fr. Jerzy is a rare model. He inspires us to give our lives for justice, human rights, and peace.

Fr. Jerzy should be better known in the United States. He was a simple, shy, devout priest—but also a towering prophet and mighty nonviolent resister, the Martin Luther King of Poland. We have not had anyone quite like him in U.S. Catholic history—a beloved priest, a political prophet, and a martyr of Gospel nonviolence.

Born in 1947, he was ordained in 1972 and served in various churches around Warsaw. Sometimes ailing, and by temperament reserved, rarely did he enter the political fray or take part in discussions on the

subject. But shortly after the Gdansk ship workers went on strike in August 1980, joined after that by the Warsaw steelworkers, the strikers occupying the steel plant asked the diocese to send a priest to offer Mass. The chancery sent Fr. Jerzy. His life was changed, and so was the movement.

By all accounts, the Mass was electrifying. The steel workers captured Fr. Jerzy's heart. And it dawned on him. Their struggle for justice and freedom accorded with the hopes of the Gospel. He became their pastor, and the church where he lived, St. Stanislaw Kostka, became an unofficial headquarters for the workers, unionists, and supporters. As the Solidarity movement grew, it boldly pitted itself against the brutal Communist regime, and Fr. Jerzy stood in living solidarity with the movement.

No surprise that the regime responded quickly. December 1981, the government declared martial law, and Solidarity was banned. Police detained thousands of members and supporters, and as the movement struggled to go on, Fr. Jerzy stayed with them, helping as he could.

He was a supportive presence at trials of Solidarity members. He ministered to their families. Then a few months after martial law was imposed, he offered a special "Mass for the Nation." Thousands who turned out. Electricity again on the air, and a sense of cohesion and resolve. He offered this special mass thereafter every month. And as other priests caught wind of the spirit, they too held similar masses. The nonviolent movement would not be suppressed. Quite the contrary.

The church was the one institution in Poland where the arm of martial law couldn't quite reach. It became the place where dissenters gathered. Fr. Jerzy didn't preach with the fiery eloquence of Martin Luther King, but he was happy to give the floor before Mass began to artists and poets and singers—all of them bringing their subversive wares to the people. Fr. Jerzy wasn't a performer but a stabilizing presence, an encourager, a plain truth-teller in his sermons. He radiated strength and hope at a time when both were in short supply. Soon his sermons were broadcast throughout Poland and later, Europe.

The regime took notice—and the slander campaign against him began. They questioned his priestly credentials. They declared his involvement with Solidarity inappropriate. They pressured church hierarchs to remove him. As for Fr. Jerzy, he responded like a good shepherd: "The mission of the church is to be with the people and to share in their joys and sorrows. To serve God is to condemn evil in all its manifestations."

The regime stepped up their efforts. Security police held him under constant surveillance. Provocateurs interrupted his Masses. He came home one night to find his home had been vandalized—on another occasion bombed. In 1983 the police arrested him on trumped-up charges—the police said they had found stockpiles of explosive in his rectory. Dark figures drove by the rectory all night honking their horns. Someone left the bloodied body of his dog at the rectory door.

Those closest to him acknowledged that he was afraid. But he carried on. "The only thing we should fear is the betrayal of Christ for a few silver pieces of meaningless peace."

On October 1984, the police staged a car accident. But he escaped unharmed. A week later, on October 19, 1984, while he and his driver were returning from an evening Mass at a remote church, security officers stopped them and forced Fr. Jerzy into the trunk of their car. Fr. Jerzy's driver escaped into the night and lived to tell.

Fr. Jerzy wasn't seen alive again.

Months before, afraid for the priest, strikers had petitioned the cardinal to send Fr. Jerzy abroad. He had refused to go.

Eleven days after he was kidnapped, on October 30, 1984, his body was found. By now what happened has been revealed. He had been savagely beaten with clubs, tied with a rope, loaded with stones, and dumped, still alive, into a reservoir. He was 37 years old.

‘If we must die suddenly, it is surely better to meet death defending a worthwhile cause than sitting back and letting injustice win,’ Fr. Jerzy once said.

His funeral drew a million people, and marked the beginning of the end of the brutal Communist regime. Five years later, in Poland’s first free election, a Solidarity government was elected.

‘Why are so many priests and bishops silent in the face of injustice and war,’ Roy asked in Toronto, ‘when the teachings of Jesus call so clearly for justice and peace?’ There are many reasons: fear, money, ignorance, despair, indifference, the repercussions of the ongoing sex abuse scandal, a basic lack of faith, among other things.

‘The priest is called to bear witness to the truth, to suffer for the truth, and if need be to give up his life for it,’ Fr. Jerzy wrote in 1984. ‘We have many such examples in Christianity. From them we should draw conclusions for ourselves.’

Fr. Jerzy Popieluszko himself is such an example. Every priest and bishop should speak out for justice and peace like Fr. Jerzy, and not just about abortion, but about all the issues—the evil U.S. wars on Iraq and Afghanistan, the evil corporate greed that leads billions to suffer in poverty, the evil nuclear arsenal and catastrophic environmental destruction, and the violence and injustice that are crushing us all.

Fr. Jerzy invites all of us to break through our fear, silence, despair, complicity and indifference, and follow Jesus by joining the struggle for justice and peace. He reminds us that all of us need to speak out publicly, and give our lives in nonviolent, suffering love for the poor and oppressed. That, he says, makes for a more meaningful life ‘than sitting back and letting injustice win.’

In this dark hour for the church and the world, his beatification is a moment worth celebrating. Perhaps he can help us return to the Gospel of Jesus, and keep on working for justice and peace.

To contribute to Catholic Relief Services? ‘Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund,’ go to: <http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. John will speak on ‘Gandhi, King and Day,’ at Loyola in Chicago, June 25-26 in Chicago (see: www.asrenewal.org), and teach a weeklong course, ‘Gandhi, King, Day and Merton,’ Aug. 2-6, 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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