

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

July 6, 2010 at 1:40pm

Mother Teresa and the U.S.S. Intrepid

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

I shouldn't be surprised; we're often hit with bizarre news. But doings around Mother Teresa's 100th birthday takes grotesquery to a new level. Seems there's a political ruckus in New York City about how to honor her Aug. 26. Anyone with a little sense knows the appropriate thing: reassign funds for war and military recruitment to house the homeless and feed the poor.

This would be especially fitting in Manhattan, because by lifting rent control, the borough has been systematically evicting the poor for years and catering to its growing number of millionaires.

Some Catholics have been pressing to illuminate the Empire State Building, in Mother Teresa's honor, in white and blue. The Empire State Building has refused, citing a policy against honoring religious figures. Not to worry: the U.S.S. Intrepid caught wind of the news and thought, here's a ripe moment for good press. And so they offered to do the honors.

The aircraft-carrier-turned-war-museum, officially called "the Intrepid Sea, Air and Space Museum," resides at Pier 86, at West 46th and 12th Avenue. Why not shine those lights on us? they said. Hard to imagine. The jets on the deck, the missiles on display --festooned and illumined in white and blue to honor Mother Teresa's peacemaking life.

According to *The Daily News* of June 14, the city is pleased. "We're thrilled to be able to light up the ship," said Susan Marenoff, executive director of the war museum. "It is a proper representation of public service, as we parallel the public service efforts she did."

"As we parallel the public service efforts she did." What sheer ignorance! Has Ms. Marenoff ever studied the life of Mother Teresa, or served the poor, or studied the Gospel of Jesus? With this statement, she betrays any knowledge of true public service or Gospel peacemaking. Either she is ignorant or the war

museum is embezzling Mother Teresa's good name.

Contrary to what Ms. Marenoff believes, the U.S.S. Intrepid does not serve the public. It hurts the public. It serves the myth and culture of war. It teaches people, especially the thousands of school children who tour the "museum of death" each month, that mass murder is a legitimate means to resolve conflict. Like the Atomic Museum in Albuquerque, N.M. or the Bradbury Museum in Los Alamos which celebrate nuclear weapons, the U.S.S. Intrepid promotes Death as a social methodology. It is antithetical to the Gospel of life, love and peace. The very things Mother Teresa expended her life on.

Mother Teresa taught and lived the works of mercy and peace -- feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, shelter the homeless, heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, and care for the dying. The Intrepid upholds the opposite: the works of mercilessness and war -- starve the enemy, destroy crops and homes, spread disease, poison the land, make people sick, imprison people, torture, bomb and kill people. She insisted that Matthew 25 is true: whatever we do to our sisters and brothers around the world, especially to the poor and the enemy, we do to Jesus.

The only way the Intrepid can participate in honoring Mother Teresa is to close its doors, clear its decks of its warlike exhibits and convert itself into a floating shelter for the homeless and needy.

I knew her well enough to understand that Mother Teresa was adamantly committed to peace and life. On many occasions we spoke on the phone, and as I languished in jail for symbolically beating a hammer against a F15 jet in North Carolina, she offered to pay me a visit. I also knew her as a woman of enormous strength. She tried to stop every effort to use her image. Were she still alive, she would be appalled and saddened by our blindness.

Since this "museum of death" opened in 1982, my friends and I have regularly called for its closing just outside its gangplank. And just as regularly hauled to jail. Fr. Daniel Berrigan, age 89, was just tried last month for his arrest there on Good Friday. It never ceases to shock us to see hordes of schoolchildren traipsing on board under the tutelage of teachers and curators. As if this were legitimate education. We hurt these children by teaching them that war brings peace. That war is honorable. That war is moral, noble. We should bring them on board to mourn, to teach them never to allow war to happen again.

In the spring of 1997, while teaching freshman theology for a semester at the Jesuit's Fordham University, the senior class booked its graduation dance on board the Intrepid. When I heard, I lobbied hard against it. I met with the administration, Jesuit superiors, and senior class representatives. I wrote editorials in the school newspaper and was invited to speak to dozens of classes and student groups. Don't dance around the "Golden Calf," I urged the students -- an allusion to idolatry Catholic students would be well acquainted with. Boycott the Senior Ball, I said. Soon, *The New York Times* picked up the story, and wondered aloud about those high Ignatian ideals of "the faith that does justice."

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Despite my best efforts, the dance was held there, as dozens of us, including several Jesuits, kept vigil outside. The Fordham administration later announced they would never again allow a school-sponsored dance on the Intrepid.

A wan victory, but I was gratified. I was all the more gratified by this small victory when I learned that, to convert the Intrepid from air craft carrier to museum, the city had dipped into funds allocated for low-income housing and for poor schools in the Bronx. The museum, from its inception, hurt "the least of

these.? And it hurt ?the least of these? during its active time in the fleet of the Pacific. Mother Teresa had a heart for ?the least of these.? The Intrepid stands against all that she lived for.

I hope people will boycott the U.S.S. Intrepid, and any museum that glorifies warfare. Further, this Aug. 26, I invite us to remember Mother Teresa by sharing what we have with those in need and performing some work of mercy and peace. That?s the best way to celebrate and honor her life.

To contribute to Catholic Relief Services? ?Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund,? go to: <http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. John will teach a weeklong course, ?Gandhi, King, Day and Merton,? Aug. 2-6, at Ghost Ranch Center, Abiquiu, N.M., (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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