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65 years with the atomic bomb: A gathering storm for hope

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

"Tonight's theme is the momentum from a gathering storm for hope which I believe will one day bear fruit in abolishing all nuclear weapons." That's how Bishop Gabino Zavala, President of Pax Christi USA, launched our two-day observance last weekend of the 65th anniversary of the U.S. atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

He went on and offered us his clear-eyed view. "April of 2009 represented a sea change from the former administration," he said, referring to Obama's speech in Prague. "It clearly laid out our president's vision and commitment to nuclear disarmament," toward "a nuclear free world."

But then Obama's glaring contradiction. The bishop took him to task for allocating more national treasure for nukes than his predecessor. In many documents over the past decades, the bishop reminded us, nuclear weapons have inspired official condemnation from the Catholic Church. And he urged us to take it seriously, to keep building our grassroots movement. Make your hopes for peace come true, he concluded.

Bishop Zavala's presence felt like a breath of fresh air to those of us in New Mexico who've been speaking out for disarmament for years. Not every day does one hear a Catholic bishop speaking clearly and eloquently about this crucial matter -- especially here, where nuclear weapons were first built and a new generation of them is in the works, thanks to Obama. Bishop Zavala's presence heightened our hope.

It was in that spirit of hope that we ascended the narrow road along the mountain cliff up to Los Alamos the next afternoon. We assembled ourselves at Ashley Pond, the park in the center of town where, 65 years ago, "Little Boy" and "Fat Man" were built -- carnival euphemisms to mask their impending horror.

There we passed out sackcloth and bags of ashes, then blessed them and the people of Los Alamos. In a spirit of prayer and repentance, more than a hundred of us then set off in silence along Trinity Road. At the appointed time we stopped and scattered the ashes and donned our sackcloth, and for 30 minutes we sat in prayer. We repented of our own role in the mortal sin of war and nuclear weapons, and we begged the God of peace to convert our nation to nonviolence and give us the gift of nuclear disarmament.

A weird sight to be sure. Over a dozen drivers that I saw revved by in a fit of aggression, hurling curses and insults and abuse. But processing back to the pond, friends shared how moved they were to take part in an action so imbued with the spirit of Jesus and Gandhi. And the tradition of the book of Jonah.

"Who are you trying to speak to?" an ABC TV reporter asked me just before we set off.

I said, of course, we call upon the employees and people of Los Alamos to stop designing, building and maintaining nuclear weapons. And we're speaking, as well, to the people of New Mexico, and perhaps to the world, about the need to abolish these weapons. But ultimately, I said, we're here to speak to God, to beg the God of peace for the gift of a world without war and nuclear weapons.

His eyes widened. I saw in them a fusion of wonder, amusement and surprise. "God?," he probably wanted to ask. "What does God have to do with this?" He had, I surmise, expected the usual -- a seething peace demonstration full of hysteria and anger. And here was one of penitence and sorrow, faith and hope. It was clear he was going to have some fresh thinking to do.

And all the more so because among us were representatives of the largest youth-led movement for disarmament in the country -- "Think Outside the Bomb." One doesn't often associate young people with anti-nuclear sentiments -- at least if you believe the media. But here was Jennifer, who happily told us, once we gathered back at Ashley Pond, of the group's upcoming week-long encampment and vigils in the town. They are planning a nonviolent direct action for later this week. These young folks, as the good bishop did, renewed our hope.

Miki Taylor was also among us, a doctor who grew up and spent her life in Hiroshima. She recently moved with her husband to Santa Fe, and she thanked us for our public stand. Later she told me that, while we need to remember Hiroshima and Nagasaki, we must understand that the same dark spirit which first created these weapons remains among us. The willingness to eliminate millions in a flash still lingers in the air. That evil spirit is alive and well in our military institutions, corporations, and government, and somehow, we need to change that spirit.

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To our happy surprise, Ann Wright also joined us. A former army colonel and State Department official, she famously resigned in protest in 2003 in opposition to the Iraq War. Today she is one of the great leaders in the international peace movement, and travels tirelessly to promote peace and reconciliation. She was aboard one of the boats in the recent flotilla with relief supplies to Gaza when Israeli soldiers attacked, killing nine. Currently on a national speaking tour, she is also working to raise funds for a U.S. boat to Gaza.

Last year she made a pilgrimage to Hiroshima, where she tried to take in the destruction and open her heart to the pain. As for Los Alamos, the feeling is different, she said. "It feels eerie to be here." It was her first visit to the city of the Bomb.

In that eeriness -- spectacular vistas darkened by an evil purpose -- Ann encouraged us. "Continue your work for disarmament and peace," she said, "Don't give up. While the national movement seems dead, the local movements are strong. Everywhere, small grassroots groups are organizing and holding vigils and bringing in speakers. People are doing what they can. So keep doing what you can," she said with a smile, "Together, we can make a difference."

Sixty-five years ago our nation killed civilians on an incalculable scale. And in somber commemoration, a hundred of us this past weekend took to Trinity Road with heads bowed in sorrow. The weekend has passed, but not the opportunity. Accordingly, I invite everyone to join in that spirit of prayer, repentance, and nonviolence, and to do what you can to promote nuclear disarmament, as well as an end to our nation's senseless wars.

A word of caution, however -- don't do it with anger. Anger gains little; rulers shrug it off. Their constantly being embroiled in power struggles makes them adept at thwarting it. Grief is another matter altogether. Genuine grief can't be withstood. Rulers stand helpless before it. It leaves them flustered and confounded -- and in the best of scenarios, sets their own tears flowing too. It can be an opening to compassion and nonviolence.

And so I offer the following prayer, one used at previous vigils, to help us enter into grief, to help us convert our hearts, our church, and our nation. To help us cry out for God's gift of justice, disarmament and peace. As we "storm heaven" for the gift of peace, may it generate new hope among us.

God of peace, as we remember our sisters and brothers killed in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, we repent of the atomic bomb, of those horrific acts, of all the death and destruction that we have wrought.

As our country continues to design, build and maintain these genocidal weapons of mass destruction, we repent of our mortal sin.

As our country threatens the whole human race and the entire planet, we repent of our willingness to destroy the gift of your creation.

As we continue to hold the world hostage and commit the ultimate act of terrorism by threatening to use these nuclear weapons, we repent of nuclear terrorism and the fear, distrust and infidelity we spread.

For our silence, indifference, fear and despair, we repent. For all the violence we have personally committed, and for our own complicity with the culture of war and nuclear weapons, we repent.

Disarm our hearts, disarm our cities, disarm our military and our nation, disarm our world. Give us the gift of a world without war, poverty or nuclear weapons, a new world of peace.

And so we pledge--

In this world of hatred, indifference, fear and anxiety, to be instruments of your love;

In this world of selfishness, greed and materialism, to be instruments of your selfless service and generosity;

In this world of revenge, retaliation and resentment, to be instruments of your mercy, compassion and forgiveness;

In this world of doubt and despair, to be instruments of faith and hope;

In this world of lies and darkness, to be instruments of truth and light;

In this world of war, nuclear weapons and death, to be instruments of your peace, nonviolence and life.

Strengthen us to rebuild your global grassroots movement of nonviolence, that we will inspire more and more people to work for the abolition of war, poverty and nuclear weapons, that we might welcome your reign of nonviolence, love and peace everywhere. We ask this in the name of the nonviolent Jesus. Amen.

John's column will return Sept. 7. His 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. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' "Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund," go to: <http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. For further information, or to schedule a lecture or retreat on Gospel Nonviolence, go to www.johndear.org.

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